



CONTESTED REFUGE

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN
UGANDA'S BIDIBIDI REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS

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Acronyms

DRC - Danish Refugee Council

EUTF - European Union Trust Fund

FGD - Focus Group Discussion

KII - Key Informant Interview

LC - Local Council

LCI - Local Council 1

LCII - Local Council 2

LCIII - Local Council 3

LCV - Local Council 5

NAS – National Salvation Front

OPM - Office of Prime Minister

ReHoPe - Refugee and Host Population Empowerment

RWC - Refugee Welfare Council

RWCI - Refugee Welfare Council 1

RWCII - Refugee Welfare Council 2

RWCIII - Refugee Welfare Council 3

SPLA - Sudan People's Liberation Army

SPLA-IO - Sudan People's Liberation Army - In Opposition

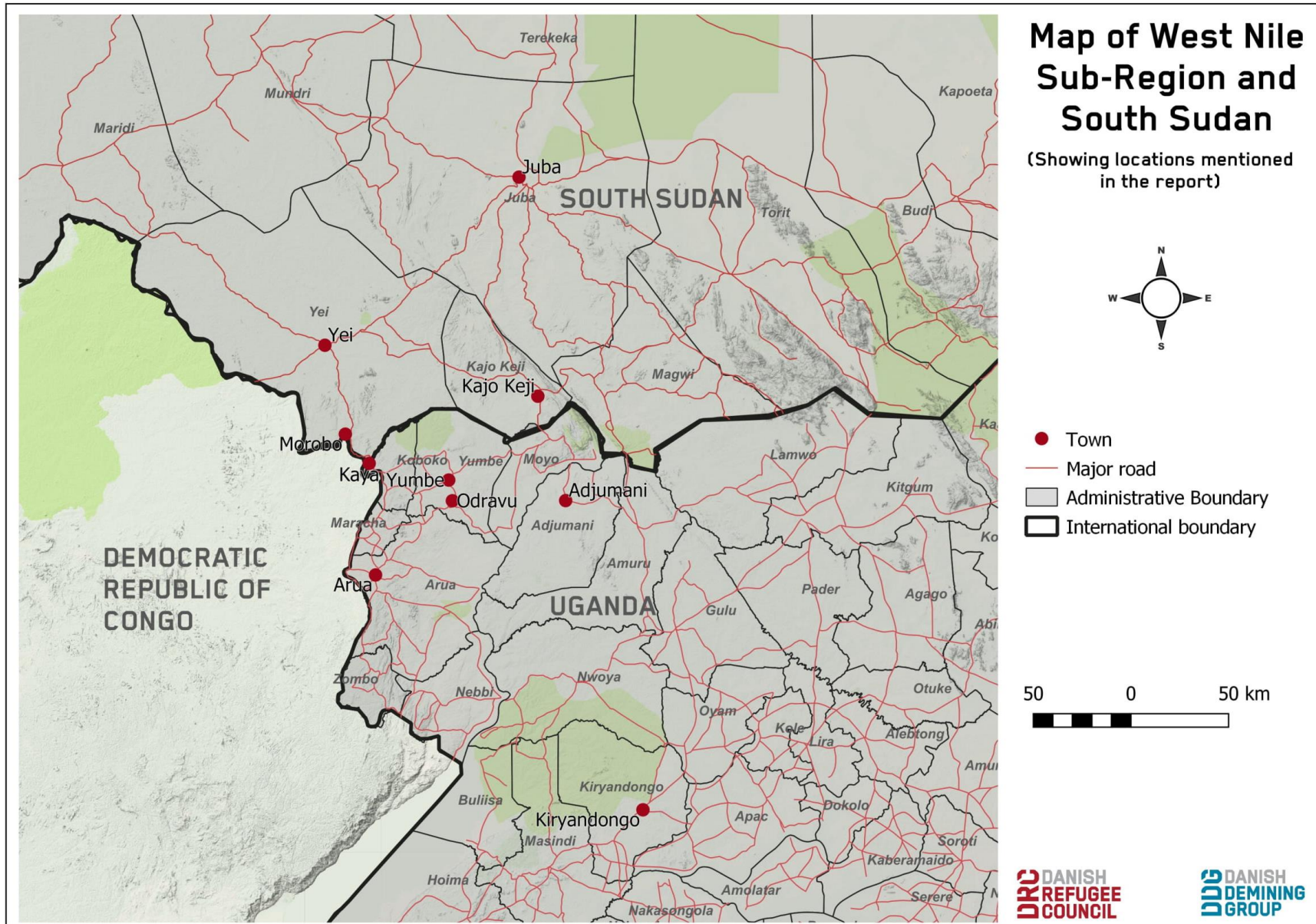
UNHCR – United Nations High Commission for Refugees

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Map



Executive Summary

In mid-2016, the conflict in South Sudan spread into the southern region of Equatoria, which borders Uganda. Officials registered 600,000 South Sudanese refugees crossing the border into northern Uganda between July 2016 and April 2017.¹ Bidibidi settlement, in Uganda's Yumbe district, was opened in August 2016 to accommodate some of this refugee flow. By December 2016 the settlement was closed to new arrivals as the largest refugee settlement in the world.

The refugee population of Bidibidi is predominantly from the Equatoria region, particularly southern Central Equatoria of what is now Yei state, as well as Eastern Equatoria. Like other South Sudanese refugee sites in Uganda, women inhabitants outnumber men. The host community is the Aringa, the indigenous population of Yumbe district. Aringa politicians lobbied for the refugee hosting site, seeking development and aid resources they associate with other areas of Uganda's West Nile sub-region that host refugees.

Uganda's refugee policy is one of the world's most progressive, promoting refugee integration rather than confinement, and direct aid resources to the host as well as the refugee population. The report examines the political economy of aid and finds that refugee hosting is neither a clear net positive or net negative for the host community. Rather, aid is contested between different groups. In particular, aid assistance is contested over food assistance, development resources, and the winners and losers of the local economy. In all three of these sectors, the assistance to refugees provides both a mutual benefit to the host community but also potential fault lines.

Within this political economy context, then, the report examines specifically the dynamics along particular conflict fault lines. Conflict between the refugees and the host community is primarily centred on access to firewood and natural resources, lingering grievances from the host community about land allocation, and direct contestation over aid resources. However, the main source of tension between refugees and host community is indirect, stemming from local politics and the host community's expressed frustrations with Ugandan authorities following decades of political marginalisation and mistrust. The host community, therefore, explicitly views the refugee population as a means of attracting aid and leverage for its relations with the central government.

The conflict dynamics within the host community are then examined further. Conflicts are primarily over desires from the host community elders for "appreciation" and claims of "unmet promises" in exchange for giving the land. The influx of refugees and aid resources have also created disputes over land boundaries and ownership. Conflicts within and among the refugee population are primarily interpersonal. When conflicts take ethnic lines, these are primarily over issues of scarce resources, with the exception of when ethnicised political rifts from South Sudan spill over into the settlements. The only notable case of this is attacks on a small population of ethnic Dinka in the settlement. There is also an issue of idle youth and gangs in the settlement.

The report then examines the means of bridging divides and resolving conflicts, first between the refugee and host communities, and then internally within the refugee population. The key means of resolving host-refugee disputes are dialogues, primarily conducted between Ugandan local councils and elected refugee leadership. The report lists some practical areas for improving host-refugee relations by focusing on shared interests, strengthening existing interactions, providing legal training, addressing host-authorities relations as a separate conflict driver, narrowing expectations for refugee-host dialogues, and empowering women in conflict mitigation mechanisms.

The report then looks at the dispute resolution mechanisms inside Bidibidi, which exists on two levels: 1) formal liaison between the refugee leadership and Ugandan law enforcement; and 2) informal alternative dispute mechanisms, often involving ethnic or communal leadership or elders. The report recommends placing greater focus on supporting these alternative ethnic or communal mechanisms, training refugee leadership and refugees on Ugandan legal context, and, again, empowering women.

¹ Electronic communication with UNHCR representative, April 10, 2017

A key gap is resolving disputes within the host community and between the host community and central government, both of which may fall outside the mandate of implementing aid agencies. However, these relations are a core driver and primary potential trigger of refugee-host conflict. The report concludes with additional conclusions and recommendations.

Some key findings (and related recommendations) of the report include

- With some notable exceptions, relations within the Bidibidi settlements are generally positive, a testament to the resilience of South Sudanese and the shared past experiences of the host community as refugees.
- While dialogue is crucial to resolving disputes as they arise, most of the conflicts stem from fundamental competition over land, natural resources and aid resources. However, the contestation for aid resources, development, and environmental conservation need not be zero-sum; the aid and development resources flowing into Yumbe are designed to benefit both groups, and both the host and refugee communities understand these shared interests due to shared previous experience as refugees and hosts over several decades.
- The most binding bridge between the refugee and host communities is access to resources: Refugees know they need goodwill from the host community, including for collection and use of firewood, and the host community wants access to the aid resources available to the refugees.
- Support should focus on strengthening shared interests of the groups to promote peaceful co-existence. Rhetoric and norms are also useful, and the shared experience, but this should not replace or crowd out shared material gain.
- Despite the predominance of women in the settlement, most of the refugee leadership remains male and male-driven. This is especially an issue given the centrality that gender plays in a number of conflicts and disputes.
- Host community grievances connected to local politics risk triggering refugee-host conflicts, even if and when tensions are not driven by a direct conflict between host and refugees.
- Conflicts over natural resources are real and unresolved. In particular, the high population density will contribute to significant environmental degradation. Women continue to face personal insecurity gathering firewood, which is needed on a daily basis.
- Conflicts over access to firewood and environmental degradation need a more focused approach to address the core structural driver of the conflict.
- There was significant concern and tension among both the refugee and host communities about biometric verification of refugee registration (carried out in Bidibidi in mid-2018) and any future decrease in food rations.
- There is still significant work to be done on formalising the communal land tenure system with humanitarian operations to mitigate conflict and disputes and enable relief projects.
- Additionally, there is a need to sensitise and educate refugees to the context of their new legal environment. Many South Sudanese refugees are fleeing areas where formal law and order is highly politicised, weak and predatory, and with a much stronger role for traditional courts and informal adjudication.
- Formal adjudication and dispute resolution mechanisms inside Bidibidi are evolving, but significant gaps remain for those seeking justice and inter-personal conflict resolution.
- Both refugee and host community leaders credited formal dialogues between refugee and host community representatives for mitigating disputes and improving relations. Support for these dialogues should continue. However, these dialogues should be viewed as one conflict mitigation tool, not a cure-all. Already, there is some discontent from non-leaders that leaders are unresponsive on issues after they have failed to be resolved by dialogues. There is also a need to improve leaders' responsiveness to their constituencies.

Introduction

The 'Support Programme for Refugee Settlements in Northern Uganda' (SPRS-NU) is a four year, 20 million euro European Union Trust Fund (EUTF) programme implemented by Austrian Development Agency, Belgian Technical Cooperation/Enabel, and the NGO Consortium led by Danish Refugee Council, which includes ZOA, CEFORD, and Save the Children. The project's overall objective is to reduce the risk of violent conflict between host communities and refugees in the districts of Adjumani, Arua, Kiryandongo and Yumbe in Northern Uganda. The overarching theory of change assumes that if host communities and refugees benefit from shared livelihoods assets, improved service delivery and conflict management mechanisms, inter-communal relations and development outcomes will improve.

In April 2018, DRC commissioned a conflict analysis in Bidibidi settlement in Yumbe district in northern Uganda primarily aimed at informing the EUTF's ongoing and future conflict management programming in the area. Focusing on refugee and host community relations, the objective of the study was to generate a report that would provide the EUTF, as well as other agencies operating in Yumbe with a better understanding of the types of conflicts to be addressed, their causes and drivers, the actors involved and their interests, key trends and entry points, and opportunities to build the communities' abilities for resolving differences without engaging in violence, as well as potential spoilers.

The study's focus was pinned and driven by the specific needs of the conflict management component in the EUTF and aimed to provide recommendations according to each activity. Specifically, these activities are:

- Train local actors on conflict sensitivity approach and land tenure system and land rights
- Community-driven awareness raising campaigns
- Train local courts held by Refugee Welfare Council, Local Council and traditional leaders/village and tribal elders on alternative dispute mechanisms and legal processes
- Facilitate community dialogue and mediation between refugee and host community

two weeks of field research were carried out in Yumbe district between April and May 2018. The study employed a qualitative methodology involving semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The lead researcher stayed in Yumbe town, the district capital of Yumbe district, and travelled to the Bidibidi settlements and the towns. Research was conducted in Zone 1, Zone 4 (main and annex), and Zone 5 of Bidibidi settlements as well as in surrounding host communities, specifically in Odravu, Romogi, and Ariwa subcounties. Although field research was also planned in Zone 2 and 3, this was not possible due to a criminal incident involving the lead researcher. The research findings presented in the report assume that the Zones surveyed are generally representative of Bidibidi as a whole. Interviews with district officials, OPM officials and host community representatives did not suggest any substantial differences in the issues raised in the Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) conducted.

In all, 29 KIIs with refugee leaders, host community leaders, Ugandan officials and humanitarian staff members, and 5 FGDs totalling 52 respondents with refugees and host community members were conducted. Respondents were identified in coordination with DRC staff in the Yumbe office based on the research agenda. Since most of the KIIs were with adult males, who hold most positions of leadership, the lead researcher organised separate focus groups with women and youth. The majority of the 54 refugees interviewed are from Central and Eastern Equatoria.

Although research was conducted in a manner sensitive to the dynamics of the context, the consultant's official affiliation with an implementing partner may have skewed responses and is a limitation of this methodology. It could have discouraged respondents from giving 'negative' opinions that were implicitly or explicitly critical of the current conflict mitigation programmes. Further, respondents may have feared giving responses deemed sensitive in a highly politicised environment. Respondents may also have feared giving critical remarks about Ugandan authorities.

Section one of this report provides an overall background of the context, including a background to the South Sudan conflict, the formation of Bidibidi, an overview of the Bidibidi refugee population, and an overview of the host community. Section two looks at the politics and political economy of hosting refugees, with a brief overview of Ugandan refugee policy and how aid is contested in the areas of food assistance, development resources and the local economy. Section three then takes a focused look at the conflict drivers between the host and refugee communities, within the refugee community, and within the host community. Section four looks at what bridges communities and resolves disputes both between refugees and host communities and within Bidibidi settlements. Section four identifies opportunities for improving relations between refugees and host communities and improving dispute resolution mechanisms in Bidibidi. The concluding section provides general recommendations for conflict sensitive programming in Bidibidi.

Background

After decades of civil war, South Sudan became the world's newest nation on 9 July, 2011. However, an internal power struggle within the ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), escalated throughout 2013 until clashes broke out in the capital, Juba, in December. These clashes quickly morphed into ethnic targeted killings against Nuer, the ethnic group of South Sudan's vice president, Riek Machar, who fled into hiding and later became the leader of a rebellion against the President Salva Kiir, an ethnic Dinka. Civilians and civilian structures are regularly and deliberately targeted in the conflict, leading to large-scale displacement.²

During the first two years of the conflict, fighting was centralised in the Greater Upper Nile area bordering Sudan and Ethiopia, the two countries which received the vast bulk of the refugees fleeing the war. However, in August 2015, the parties signed a peace deal to form a unity government and end the war. Despite this development, tensions continued to escalate across the country as opposition forces began to expand into other areas, especially in the southern Equatoria region, which borders the Central African Republic to the west, Democratic Republic of Congo to the southwest, Uganda to the south, Kenya to the southeast, and Ethiopia to the east. The spillover and eruption of the conflict in the Equatoria region followed the collapse of the peace deal in July 2016.³ This renewed and expanded fighting precipitated a large-scale exodus of refugees into Uganda, primarily Equatorians as well as inhabitants of Juba, where clashes began in July. More than a million South Sudanese are estimated to have been made refugees since the war reignited.⁴

Bidibidi, a refugee settlement in northwest Uganda in Yumbe, a district in the West Nile sub-region, opened in August 2016 and by December of that same year was closed to new arrivals. With an estimated population of 285,000 refugees,⁵ Bidibidi was, at the time, described as the largest refugee settlement site in the world.

Bidibidi was founded with the gazetting of 250 square kilometres of communal land by the host community, negotiated by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), through local officials and local community leaders.⁶ The government of Uganda and UNHCR call the areas where refugees stay in the country "settlements" not "camps" because refugees in Uganda are not legally restricted to camps. Instead, they are given plots of land on which to build houses and cultivate, and are allowed to seek employment. Due to a challenging peace process and the ongoing insurgencies operating in Equatoria, many refugees and humanitarian organisations project a potential long-term refugee presence in Uganda, with some anticipating protracted displacement through 2025.⁷

Bidibidi

Bidibidi is composed primarily of under-utilised "hunting grounds" considered by the host community as unsuitable for agriculture. The area is composed of low, rolling hills and, for the most part, rocky soil. The Bidibidi land was chosen in a way to ensure that it fell between host community settlements, which border some parts of Bidibidi.

² See Human Rights Watch, 2014. "South Sudan's New War". Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/07/south-sudans-new-war/abuses-government-and-opposition-forces>

³ See Boswell, A, 2017. "Spreading Fallout". Small Arms Survey. Available at: <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/issue-briefs/HSBA-IB28-Spreading-Fallout.pdf>

⁴ UNHCR, 2017. "South Sudanese refugees in Uganda now exceed 1 million." Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2017/8/59915f604/south-sudanese-refugees-uganda-exceed-1-million.html>

⁵ Hodgson, C. "Satellite images show how the tiny Ugandan village of Bidibidi became the world's largest refugee camp," Business Insider, 23 January, 2018, Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/birdi-satellite-images-refugees-south-sudan-2018-1>

⁶ Interview with OPM official, Bidibidi, May 7, 2018.

⁷ Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network 2017. "Bridging the Gap" Long Term Implications for South Sudanese Refugees in West Nile, Uganda." Available at: https://www.actionagainsthunger.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/bridging_the_gap_-_final.pdf

Bidibidi is composed of five zones, and each of these zones is divided into clusters, which are further divided into individual villages.⁸ Refugee leadership structures parallel Uganda's own local governance model, which is composed of ascending levels of Local Councils. At the village level, there is a Refugee Welfare Council 1, or RWC1; at the cluster level, RWC2, and for each zone, an RWC3. These are decided by elections overseen by OPM. The RWC at each level is headed by a chair.

The refugee population in Bidibidi is primarily female, with adult women outnumbering adult men by a 3:2 ratio and most households headed by women.⁹ These numbers likely underestimate the day-to-day women-to-men ratio, since refugees report that many men maintain a transient presence in the settlement while pursuing livelihood activities elsewhere or inside South Sudan or fighting in the war. Refugees perceive women as vastly outnumbering men in the settlement.

While the refugee population in Bidibidi is ethnically diverse, a vast portion are Bari speakers from Central Equatoria. The Bari-speaking ethnic groups include the Bari, Mundari, Kuku, Kakwa, Pojulu, and the Nyagwara. Most of the rest of the occupants are from other areas in Equatoria, primarily Eastern Equatoria, in particular the Ma'di and Acholi groups. There are also smaller refugee communities of other large groups in South Sudan, including the Nuer, the Shilluk, and the Dinka. Most of the non-Equatorial refugees in Bidibidi were living in Equatoria, primarily in Juba, in 2016.

Refugee displacement from South Sudan

Tensions escalated in many locales throughout early 2016 starting with the mobilisation of local Equatorial Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) militias catalysing government forces to gather in kind. Some refugees cited the increased deployment of SPLA during this period in their areas, including the deployment of the so-called Mathiang Anyoor, a paramilitary ethnic Dinka government force, before and after the Juba clashes in July.¹⁰ These local Equatorial SPLA-IO forces clashed with government forces following the breakdown of the loose ceasefire, leading to the greater deployment of government forces, greater mobilisation of SPLA-IO forces, a spiralling cycle of retaliations in rural areas, and insecurity in urban areas which often targeted civilian populations.¹¹ These accounts largely support existing research on the conflict which links the mobilisation of Equatorial militias to the national crisis and peace process.¹²

South Sudanese from Juba and villages around Yei and Kajo Keji (see map on page 3) started fleeing to Uganda in July 2016, but the numbers escalated in August, when it became clear violence was not abating. In some areas further south, such as Morobo and Kaya (see map on page 3), the wave of refugees fleeing Yei caused residents to flee their own areas, as well, in fear that the same insecurity would spread. In other cases, refugees would cite specific incidents, such as returning home to find relatives missing, getting caught in a firefight, or getting targeted by the government or SPLA-IO themselves as the circumstance that actually caused them to pack some belongings and flee. One male refugee, for example, said that he had been concerned about escalating insecurity but then came home from his trading business to find his wife, children and mother missing.¹³ *"Government soldiers accused me of feeding the rebels,"* said another refugee. *"They came to my house and investigated me. I was bringing food from Juba to village, and some vegetables to the town. I snuck out."*¹⁴ The collapse of the peace deal saw a surge in insecurity and indiscriminate killings. This, accompanied by food insecurity and a decrease in social services, such as the closure of schools and clinics, forced many to seek refuge in Uganda. Most of the refugees interviewed for

⁸ Previously, these villages were known as blocks. The name change reflects the Ugandan strategy towards refugee integration.

⁹ Ekayu, P 2017. "Preliminary Gender Analysis of the Refugee Situation in the West Nile Region." United Nations Uganda. Available at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/nrcs99zxc9jbitb/PRELIMINARY%20GENDER%20ANALYSIS%20OF%20THE%20REFUGEE%20SITUATION%20IN%20WEST%20NILE%20C%20P.E.docx?dl=0>

¹⁰ Pinaud, C. 'Who's behind South Sudan's return to fighting?' *African Arguments*, 11 July, 2016. Available at: <http://africanarguments.org/2016/07/11/whos-behind-south-sudans-return-to-fighting/>

¹¹ Amnesty International, 2017. "Help Has Not Reached Me Here," 18 June, 2017. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr59/6422/2017/en/>

¹² See Boswell 2017 and Boswell, A 2016. "Conflict in Western Equatoria", Small Arms Survey 2016.

¹³ Interview with senior RWCI official, Zone 4 Annex, Bidibidi, April 27, 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with senior RWCI official, Zone 4, Bidibidi, April 25, 2018.

this study attributed the violence to government troops, specifically the Mathiang Anyoor militia, rather than to SPLA-IO militia. Numerous refugees cited grievances with the Mathiang Anyoor. "It was the Mathiang Anyoor that was causing people to flee," said one refugee representative.¹⁵

However, the SPLA-IO militias were also accused of stealing and raiding markets while drunk. The refugees coming from Yei, especially, had to pass through SPLA-IO areas, where men were often separated from women and at times forcibly conscripted. One refugee chief referred to rebel groups as a menace, saying they accused people of spying for the government. Both sides were also accused of raping women and girls.

Refugees expressed frustration and confusion about the rapid changes in the conflict. Respondents repeatedly expressed strong antipathy towards the South Sudan government with mixed responses in relation to the SPLA-IO forces. A minority of respondents cited abuses by the SPLA-IO as prime drivers of their displacement, while others praised the SPLA-IO or gave neutral opinions, in contrast to the government forces. Generally, no close relationship or positive feeling toward with any party to the conflict was demonstrated. However, it should be noted that OPM and humanitarian agencies expect the refugees to remain neutral and detached from armed parties to the conflict.

Refugees interviewed repeatedly referred to the rebel militias as "IO," short for the SPLA-IO, the main opposition actors in the late-2016 violence in Equatoria, which remains the primary insurgency group in Equatoria.¹⁶ Refugees repeatedly framed the national conflict as the genitor of conflict they were fleeing, rather than citing a narrative centred on localised events or grievances. The responses also suggest that attempts by other armed groups, in particular the National Salvation Front (NSF) formed in early 2017 by defecting SPLA deputy chief of staff Thomas Cirillo, did not succeed in drastically altering the refugees' perceptions of relevant security actors on the ground. Many refugees expressed a repeated desire simply for the war to end:

"For most of us in the settlement here, we are not politicians, we are not highly educated. We know there is fighting in South Sudan. And we're neither supporting Riek nor Salva. We need these people to just be reconciled, that's all we know."¹⁷

These findings have two implications for the refugee relief operations in Uganda. First, these dynamics suggest that the refugees perceive the government and the SPLA-IO as the two most relevant armed actors in the conflict in their local areas. Until a notable shift in the insurgent and security dynamics, such as an unlikely expansion of security provided by either the government or SPLA-IO forces, refugees will remain skeptical of returning to South Sudan in the absence of a credible peace deal. Moreover, any overarching political settlement that does involve the SPLA-IO as a key actor will not be taken seriously by the refugees in Uganda. This finding should not be surprising, given that efforts by the government to attract refugee returns in the absence of such a political settlement have made little headway. Scenario mapping and contingency planning, therefore, should correlate refugee presence in the near- to medium-term to the national peace process. These dynamics are difficult to project past the medium-term, however, given possibilities of SPLA-IO fracture and shifts in regional responses to the war. Even if a political settlement is reached, refugees will remain cautious about returning until there are signs that it will be seriously implemented, especially given the extreme violence that followed the collapse of the previous accord.

¹⁵ Interview with former RWCI official, Zone 1, Bidibidi, April 28, 2018.

¹⁶ Boswell 2017.

¹⁷ Interview with senior RWCII official, Zone 4 Annex, Bidibidi, April 27, 2018.

The host community

In 2014, Yumbe district's recorded Ugandan population was roughly 485,000.¹⁸ Yumbe is the historic land of the Aringa people, the majority of whom are subsistence farmers and followers of Islam.¹⁹ Yumbe is one of the poorest districts in Uganda.²⁰ Schools and health centres are severely under-resourced and underperforming, infrastructure is underdeveloped, and economic opportunities lag behind the rest of the nation.²¹ The Aringa's history of conflict, poverty, and Islamic faith provide a backdrop of perceived and actual marginalisation of the Aringa inside Uganda.

Unlike other communities in northern Uganda, the Aringa do not report sharing direct ethnic ties to communities across the border in South Sudan; however, many Aringa are aware of distant kinship with many groups of South Sudan. The Aringa language is part of the Central Sudanic family, which also includes South Sudan's Ma'di, Avokaya and Moro languages. Aringa is distinct but related to the Lugbara spoken in Arua. Aringa is variously categorised as a dialect of Lugbara or as a separate language of its own.²² Many Aringa speak both Aringa and common Lugbara. There are no known indigenous Aringa populations in South Sudan. However, some Aringa feel an affiliation with their South Sudanese neighbours as marginalised groups with a shared historical and kinship link. For instance, one Aringa elder described the following relationship with South Sudan:

"It is strongly believed among the Lugbara communities that we are originally from Sudan and South Sudanese are our brothers. This is because the forefathers, when telling the history of the clan, they'd say they originate from the north. Which is basically South Sudan."²³

Due to the wider region's history of conflict, including northern Uganda, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, the Aringa people are accustomed to the refugee experience, both as hosts and refugees. Northwest Uganda has served as a base for refugees from neighbouring countries and internally displaced Ugandans, with previous refugee spikes occurring during Sudan's first civil conflict in the 1960s and influx of internally displaced people during the insurgency of Lord's Resistance Army.²⁴ The West Nile sub-region saw repeated waves of conflict from the end of West Nile native Idi Amin's²⁵ presidency, through the 1990s and, in some cases, 2000s. The Ugandan government signed a final peace deal with the Ugandan National Resistance Front - II (UNRF2) in Yumbe town in 2002.

As a result of this history, many host community members reported previously fleeing to South Sudan as refugees themselves and cited this as one of the reasons for their welcoming attitude, even if their experiences as refugees in what was then southern Sudan were mixed. Some cited positive interactions and gratitude towards South Sudanese from their previous stay in South Sudan. "We were once in Sudan. We were taken there because of war. So we thought these people who are coming are like brothers for us," one Aringa clan chief said.²⁶

¹⁸ Ugandan Bureau of Statistics <https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/2014CensusProfiles/YUMBE.pdf>

¹⁹ Joshua Project: https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/19162/UG

²⁰ UNDP, 2016. 'Uganda: Human Development Indicators.' Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/UGA>

²¹ Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network 2017. "Bridging the Gap" Long Term Implications for South Sudanese Refugees in West Nile, Uganda." Available at:

https://www.actionagainsthunger.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/bridging_the_gap_-_final.pdf

²² See "The Moru-Ma'di Survey Report" 1996 <http://www-01.sil.org/silesr/1999/001/mmsurvey-w97.pdf>

²³ Interview with subcounty land official on April 26, 2018.

²⁴ International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) 2018. "My Children Should Stand Strong to Make Sure We Get Our Land Back": Host Community Perspectives of Uganda's Lamwo Refugee Settlement, March 2018. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lamwo-policy-paper-FINAL.pdf>

²⁵ Amin was an ethnic Kakwa; his vice-president was an Aringa

²⁶ Focus group discussion with Voku subclan elders, April 30, 2018.

he memories of their stay in South Sudan, however, are complex, in large part due to traumatic forced returns from South Sudan. In 1987, the SPLA burned down many of the Ugandan refugee camps hosting the West Nile populations, forcibly returning them to Uganda. Many from West Nile believed this forced return to have been conducted at the behest of the Ugandan government, who backed the SPLA and was believed to fear the creation of a Sudan-based rebel front emerging from the camps. Further, in 1989, the SPLA was allowed to use the West Nile region as a base, resulting in hostilities with the Ugandan populations.²⁷

Several host respondents mentioned the trauma of being driven out of Sudan by the SPLA in the 1980s. These respondents described being driven away by “the Dinka”, who dominated the then rebel SPLA, now the national army of South Sudan. This language — being driven from their homes by the “Dinka” — starkly mirrors language used by the Bidibidi refugees to describe their current displacement. Leaders of the host community suggested that they therefore understood and sympathised with the plight faced by the Bidibidi refugees. However, some also conceded that some members of the host community may not differentiate between the groups in South Sudan and may hold ongoing grievances against South Sudanese in general due to those episodes or other negative personal experiences.

The previous cross-border refugee experiences from both communities has created a limited amount of multilingual communication between the groups. Although the lack of shared languages remains a barrier for most of the refugee and host community members, some Aringa can speak Arabic, and some of the refugees can speak Lugbara.

Previous experience as refugees did not appear to be the prime motivating factor for agreeing to host the refugees, however, as the host community repeatedly noted they agreed to host the refugees in hopes of attracting development resources to their area, which parallels the findings in other Ugandan host communities.²⁸ This connection will be closely examined in the next section.

²⁷ For more on the 1987 and 1989 episodes, see ‘The Anguish of Northern Uganda’ 1997.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/anguish-northern-uganda-section-2>

²⁸ Volsang, A. 2017. ‘Local Communities’ Receptiveness to Host Refugees: A Case Study of Adjumani District in times of a South Sudanese Refugee Emergency.’ MA Thesis. Utrecht University Repository. Available at: <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/353562>

The politics and political economy of hosting refugees

According to several key informants, Aringa elite lobbied heavily in 2016 to host the incoming refugee influx. The host community sees the influx of refugees primarily through an economic rather than a normative lens. Even if some host community members were also driven by generosity, shared humanity and reciprocity, the perceived competition for hosting refugee settlements speaks to the resources expected to be won from the aid community. Local Ugandan politicians, officials and host community representatives repeatedly stressed that Yumbe felt left behind after seeing other areas of West Nile gain development resources following the hosting of refugees.

While the host community benefits from the schools, health centres and boreholes that NGOs build, some reports have questioned the assumption that host communities naturally win from the influx of resources into their area. For instance, the OECD found that the benefits accrued to the host community “seldom outweigh the negative impacts of a large-scale refugee presence over extended periods.”²⁹ The same study also emphasised the long-term negative impact of environmental degradation on host populations. Benefits that do accrue may be monopolised by local elites, leaving most of the host community with net negative costs for the use of their land. “Refugee hosting communities sometimes see a small-scale economic boom, though the resources normally accrue to wealthy people who already have the capital to respond to the opportunity,” noted a study by Refugee International.³⁰ In particular, agricultural workers competing with cheap labour provided by refugees suffer the most.³¹ This finding challenges widespread attitudes among aid agencies that the host community is benefiting from the refugee presence, which can lead to dismissive attitudes towards legitimate grievances, such as sharply increased costs of living and environmental destruction.

The refugee economy can serve to bridge relations between the host and refugee communities when the benefits are perceived as mutual and fair. The same links, however, can prove divisive when the contestation is viewed as zero-sum. Both communities can perceive themselves as marginalised, thereby fuelling grievances. The host community perceives that the welfare of the refugees is prioritised over the welfare of the host community; meanwhile, refugees widely share a profound sense of vulnerability and marginalisation as foreigners.

This section will briefly discuss Ugandan refugee policy and look at three areas of its greatest impact on the local political economy. This shared political economy is a factor for both potential conflict as well as potential solidarity, as the further sections of the report will show.

Ugandan Policy

Uganda's refugee policy, known as Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE), is widely acknowledged as one of the most progressive in the world.³² The government-led policy is designed to generate a more sustainable, harmonious and equitable system as well as a more dignifying refugee experience through integration and access to livelihoods rather than confinement and exclusion.³³ Aid and development is to ultimately support self-reliance, not emergency assistance.³⁴ A key pillar of ReHoPE is to treat both host and refugee communities as recipients in refugee aid relief. Most significant to the host community's understanding of these benefits is the “30% rule”, a vague rule of thumb about the

²⁹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2001. “The DAC Guidelines Helping Prevent Violent Conflict”. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/development/incaf/1886146.pdf>

³⁰ Refugees International, 2009. “World Refugee Day: Putting host communities center stage”. 22 June, 2009. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/world-refugee-day-putting-host-communities-center-stage>

³¹ Maystadt, JF and Verwimp, P 2009. “Winners and losers among a refugee-hosting population”. CORE. Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6376457.pdf>

³² Funding shortfalls have been significant, however.

³³ United Nations Country Team and World Bank in Uganda 2017. “ReHoPE: Strategic Framework Uganda”. 03 Feb 2017.

³⁴ Devex, 2016. ‘In Uganda, a new approach for refugees — and for Ugandans,’ 21 September 2016. Available at: <https://www.devex.com/news/in-uganda-a-new-approach-for-refugees-and-for-ugandans-88774>

percentage of overall aid that is to go towards the host community. According to an OPM official, the 30% rule is “loose” and “not official” and is only meant to apply to livelihood projects. However, other local officials and host community representatives repeatedly stressed an understanding that the rule did apply to development projects, including boreholes and infrastructure, and described interactions with aid agencies premised on that understanding. The wide appropriation of the “30%” rule by the host community has deeply entrenched the transactional logic of hosting refugees in local discourse and justified an entitlement to aid resources as reward for refugee-hosting.

Uganda is also a pilot country for the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), stemming from the New York Declaration for Rights and Migrants adopted at the UN Summit of September 2016.³⁵ The all-encompassing aim of the CRRF is “to enhance the capacities, funds and skills of the government, especially in refugee-hosting districts, including different authorities concerned at national and district levels to address these challenges. This will enable the government to respond and integrate the new arrivals for the benefit of both refugee and host communities.”³⁶ The Secretariat for the CRRF in Uganda, under the leadership of the Government of Uganda, ensures coherence among the various CRRF components in addition to engaging with pre-existing structures such as the Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA) and the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) initiatives. The four key objectives of the CRRF are: 1) to ease pressure on host countries; 2) build refugee self-reliance; 3) expand access to resettlement in third countries; and 4) foster conditions to enable voluntary refugee returns to home countries. The CRRF was launched in Uganda in March 2017 and is spearheaded by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM).

Food assistance

The largest element of the new relief economy in Yumbe is the food assistance to the refugees. This is also the most contentious aspect of the local relief economy because this resource formally exclusively targets the refugee population. In reality, however, the food distribution to refugees does make its way to the host community as well.³⁷

It is an ‘open secret’, an implicit understanding among refugees and the host community that members of the host community have managed to register as refugees for the purpose of receiving food rations. One Aringa community leader acknowledged the significant presence of Aringa individuals with refugee cards. Other local officials and host community representatives did not deny that members are on the refugee register. One Ugandan national admitted to holding a refugee card noting that the OPM gave him a refugee card since he was living amongst the refugees.³⁸ Some refugees described a significant presence of “Lugbara” speakers with refugee cards at distribution points.

Informants described several means of acquiring refugee cards. Some Yumbe residents, it was alleged, crossed into South Sudan and then back across the border. Others described a black market in which refugees sold their own cards, returned temporarily to South Sudan, and were issued with a new refugee card on their return to Uganda. Other respondents suggested that local elites encouraged and mobilised the wider community to get refugee cards through these various means in order to benefit from the refugee presence. Some refugee and host community representatives suspected that some stakeholders benefit from escalated registration numbers given the side economy of supply and logistics services for the humanitarian assistance. While no evidence was sought or provided to back up these claims, these perceptions of reality should be accounted for. However, such host registration is not unique or unusual, given the incentives involved. One 2010 study of the Dadaab refugee settlement, for instance, found that

35 For further information, see: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1

36 Roadmap for the Implementation of the CRRF in Uganda (2018-2020)

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/64290.pdf>

37 The Daily Monitor, 2017. ‘Ugandans struggle to register as refugees in Yumbe.’ The Daily Monitor, 4 April 2017, Available at: <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Ugandans--register--refugees-South-Sudan-Monitor/688334-3876932-1mop8w/index.html>

38 FGD with male and female youth in Village 8, Zone 4 Annex on April 30, 2018.

27% of the surrounding host community within a 50 km radius — an estimated 40,500 Kenyans — held refugee cards.³⁹

Food distribution to refugees now forms an epicentre of local economic activity. One Ugandan official described a visit to a Ugandan village in Yumbe district at some distance from the Bidibidi settlements. When he arrived, he found, to his surprise, the village largely deserted and was told that most of its residents were at a refugee food distribution. The Ugandan official cited the incident as anecdotal evidence of the large number of Ugandan nationals in Yumbe registered and receiving food assistance by passing as refugees. However, other respondents counter-argued that the significant presence of Yumbe residents at food distributions is expected, since food distributions turn into bustling temporary markets, with both Ugandan nationals and refugees buying and trading goods, attracting much of the wider community who wished to buy the food directly from the refugees, presumably at discount prices, and refugees wishing to sell food for cash to purchase other items.

Several host representatives argued that accessing food relief was a “fair” exchange for hosting refugees. Many refugees suggested that they also perceived the issue through the same lens as did the host community, in which the wider food distribution was an effective means of trading for peaceful relations — ‘food for land’, in effect, purchased on behalf of the refugees by the donors. Therefore, food assistance is viewed through the lens of political economy by both refugees and host communities, despite the latter being excluded from food relief.

Development Resources

As opposed to food items, much of the material relief efforts in the ReHOPE strategy are designed to benefit both refugee and host communities directly. Overall, however, host community members spoke positively about the increased aid in the region:

“We are happy because [of an increase in] schools and health centres, so the other clans can take their children here for school or treatment instead of to Arua,” said one Aringa clan elder.⁴⁰

In general, it is tacitly accepted by the refugee population that the host communities are entitled to access the development resources in the refugee communities. This includes the shared use of schools, medical facilities, boreholes and recreational spaces such as football pitches. Although some instances of tensions between the refugees and host communities over these resources were reported, especially when a particular resource is scarce (i.e. borehole), these cases appear to be isolated and contingent rather than the norm. Both refugee and host community representatives saw the shared use of resources as positive in bridging relations between the host community and the refugee population, even if at times there were tensions over scarce resources. As in the case of food distribution, many refugees recognised that sharing these benefits was a net positive because the influx of resources satiates the host community and encourages them to be friendlier to the refugee population.

Despite this overall positive climate, both refugee and host communities occasionally describe these resources in zero-sum language, in which a borehole or football pitch for one area is perceived as one less available for the rest. In particular, respondents at various times described schools, medical clinics, “permanent buildings”, boreholes, latrines, roads, and football pitches in zero-sum language.

There is also disagreement between the various levels of the local councils about the 30% of aid resources designated for the benefit of host communities. The Yumbe district LCV argued that the designated 30% of resources should go to the district to be distributed. In turn, the LCIII claimed that the 30% should go to

³⁹ World Bank 2010. “In Search of Protection and Livelihoods: Socio-economic and Environmental Impacts of Dadaab Refugee Camps on Host Communities.” Available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/244362-1170428243464/3408356-1285699758624/Daadab_study_august26.pdf

⁴⁰ Interview with Wolo subclan elder on April 26, 2018.

the sub-regions which actually host the refugee settlement. Meanwhile, the LCII and LCIs also argued that the 30% should be allocated to them. However, all parties agreed and complained that there was no transparency about the allocation of resources in a way that would enable oversight.⁴¹ Implementing partner relief agencies, meanwhile, viewed the 30% as something of a rule of thumb; according to local officials, each relief agency seemed to apply its own interpretation of the rule.⁴² This perceived lack of transparency and vagueness breeds suspicion that the host community is being “cheated” of its share. However, it should be noted that the undefined and contested parameters of the 30% rule also helps diffuse conflict by never formalising the rule’s “winners” and “losers”.

The influx of concentrated development in the refugee settlement area has created unintended consequences among the host community. One local Ugandan official said that school children were relocating in large numbers away from distant areas of Yumbe district towards the Bidibidi zones, where the quality of schooling was perceived to be better and school materials were provided to all, refugee or host, for free. This was causing a number of secondary effects, including a disruptive wave of children leaving their parents’ households for those of other extended kin as well as declining resources, which are determined pro rata by school enrolment, towards the remote schools, further gutting those communities.

Another example of the gravitational effect of these new resources is, according to one humanitarian worker, the allocation of ‘mama’s kits’ to the mothers of newborns, which has prompted a disproportionate spike in births in the refugee medical facilities as pregnant women from the host community travel long distances to give birth in the Bidibidi clinics for the ‘mama’s kits’.⁴³ This was reported as leading to a number of incidental miscarriages along the way.⁴⁴

Local economy

Jobs and market competition are the other major impact of the relief assistance on the local host-refugee economy. The main direct expected economic benefit of hosting refugees for the community is employment. While some host community representatives complained that NGOs and relief agencies were hiring too many refugees and Ugandans from outside Yumbe, employment opportunities, overall, have risen significantly by the relief operations. Still, perceptions of an equitable share of these increased opportunities do matter.

The impact of the refugee presence on other economic indicators is more mixed. Locals, especially in Yumbe town, complained about the rising cost of living, namely food and rent. However, a 2017 report from Action Against Hunger notes that while the influx in 2016 caused massive inflation in local prices, the markets have since “adapted, expanded and evolved to suit the needs of the new residents.”⁴⁵

For the Aringa farmers, the influx of refugees could, in theory, provide a wider market for their goods. However, refugees have limited purchasing power and the distribution of free food rations can, instead, lower the demand for cereals on the open market. The refugee population also creates more competition for local livelihoods, especially agriculture and charcoal production. At the time of research, however, this market competition did not appear to be a leading grievance.

41 Interview with Odruvu subcounty senior government official, April 25, 2018; Interview with government official of bordering host community on April 26, 2018; Interview with Yumbe district senior government official, May 7, 2018.

42 Ibid

43 ‘Mama’s kits’ include basic items for newborn infants, including a blanket.

44 Interview with Ugandan national humanitarian worker, Yumbe town, May 5 2018.

45 Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network 2017. “Bridging the Gap” Long Term Implications for South Sudanese Refugees in West Nile, Uganda.” Available at: https://www.actionagainsthunger.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/bridging_the_gap_-_final.pdf

Conflict Dynamics

This section will look at conflict dynamics in the Bidibidi settlements, examining first the relations between the host and refugee communities, then the conflict within the refugee community, followed by the conflict within the host community.

Conflicts between Hosts and Refugees

Host-refugee relations in Yumbe are generally positive, although both communities note ongoing tensions over land use and access to natural resources. A core finding of the study is that tensions between refugees and hosts are not driven primarily by direct hostilities between the two sides. Rather, the main drivers of conflicts between the refugee and host communities stem from competition over natural resources and unresolved political grievances. The host community, for instance, views the refugees as a source of substantial leverage in dealings with the central government to address perceived political marginalisation and underdevelopment. In other cases, refugees and host community agree that the members of the host community may take out frustrations on or threaten refugees due to local politics over development and resources.

Interpersonal relations

Despite some conflicts over land, natural resources and refugee registration, neither refugees nor host communities expressed significant or dramatic conflict between the two sides. When issues did arise on an interpersonal level, leaders on both sides identified language barriers as a driver of discord, with basic interactions getting misconstrued and misunderstood. "The refugees mostly speak their home language, which is not understood here," explained the General Secretary from Kitole village who listed communication as the number one factor causing problems between the two groups. "Equally, the community here speaks in language they don't understand. So in such a situation, people can hear everything as negative even if it is not," he concluded.⁴⁶

Religious differences did not appear to be a driving factor of hostilities between the two sides. While it is possible that religious differences may widen the in-group/out-group gap between the two communities, this was not evident in the research findings.

Natural resources

Firewood is a basic need for the refugee community, especially because most cannot afford charcoal and no form of cooking fuel is provided to them. Most refugees, therefore, use firewood on a daily basis. Wood is also needed to construct homes. Given the size of the refugee population across vast swaths of land, this means there are high numbers of refugees foraging the land outside the refugee settlements daily.

The conflict between the host community and the refugee population that seems to require the most intervention is the issue of access to firewood. Collection of firewood around Bidibidi is ad hoc, with undefined and negotiable rights to refugees and host members on a local basis, triggering hostility, conflict and perceptions of insecurity. Furthermore, the refugees' need to negotiate access from the surrounding host community for this daily need feeds a perpetual vulnerability — when discussing other points of conflict between refugee and host communities, refugees would often circle back to the ultimate need for the refugees to remain on cooperative terms with the host community to continue to collect firewood.

However, refugees have no clear or designated access to areas to gather firewood and biomass in the refugee settlements was quickly cleared. There is no formal right for refugees to enter the surrounding land, although most continue to do so. This presents opportunities for threats, assault and extortion to an already traumatised population. There were distinct perspectives between refugee representatives —

⁴⁶ Interview with government official of bordering host community on April 26, 2018.

nearly invariably, men — and their local Ugandan counterparts. Both groups insisted that the conditions for gathering has improved. Refugee women surveyed (usually responsible for firewood collection) insisted that collecting firewood remained insecure, fraught and traumatic. When asked about the discrepancy, women respondents agreed that many had ceased reporting daily issues because of the perception that nothing would be done.

This problem is twofold. First, there is no gazetted area designated for the refugee community to access firewood. The language barrier poses additional challenges, leading to both misunderstanding and obfuscation. According to interviews, refugee women often judged Aringa men they encountered as threatening assault, including gender-based violence, and, thus, they fled, terrified. Aringa representatives, however, claimed that their intentions were often misjudged — for instance, the man might simply be trying to communicate that this is an area he planned to use for charcoal production.

While there have been consistent efforts to mitigate this, and some progress has been reported, this issue is, to some degree, unresolvable unless land is clearly gazetted for firewood collection for each refugee settlement (that is then proactively conserved for sustainable use), or, alternatively, other cooking fuel is provided to the refugees. For instance, in one attempt to mitigate the conflict, the host community asked its land users to mark trees that they did not want cleared. However, refugee women then complained that the hosts painted even small or dry trees, not leaving enough for refugee women to collect, thus leading again to conflict.⁴⁷

The second aspect of this problem is the unsustainable environmental degradation as biomass is cleared in the environs of the refugee settlement.⁴⁸ Refugees were often understood by hosts or officials to be temporary visitors who did not respect the land or care about sustainable land use. One OPM official called the refugees “careless” and said: “*Environmental degradation is a very big problem. The only way to solve this one is to plant more trees. We’ve been trying to harmonise this one. But we need much intervention in terms of planting more trees.*”⁴⁹ While the members of the host community did not relay aggressive complaints with regard to land sharing, questions about environmental degradation prompted angry replies. The refugee presence has increased the Yumbe population by roughly 50%, and is heavily concentrated in certain areas. This proves a sudden and monumental strain on natural resources.⁵⁰ Of specific concern to the host community is grass, which the host community needs to feed its livestock. Refugees, however, cut grass for their own use to thatch homes or, on occasion, they burn grass in accordance with traditional customs for preparing land for cultivation or hunting for wild animals. One local Ugandan official remarked:

“The environment has been degraded. It’s been massive. The community needs mitigation measures to rehabilitate the environment, which is now out of control. It will cause a lot of problems. Environment has many components. There were issues of bush burning. It can destroy grass, and destroy trees. It can also cause pollution in the atmosphere. We want a comprehensive approach to be taken to mitigate issues related to the environment.”⁵¹

An OPM official also highlighted these challenges, suggesting that agencies should consider providing efficient cooking stoves to refugees and step-up efforts to plant trees. “*But intervention is very little,*” he said. “*That conflict between the refugees and the host over firewood will not stop. Unless we intervene.*”

⁴⁷ FGD with refugee women in Village 12, Zone 1, April 28, 2018.

⁴⁸ Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network 2017. “Bridging the Gap” Long Term Implications for South Sudanese Refugees in West Nile, Uganda.” Available at:

https://www.actionagainsthunger.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/bridging_the_gap_-_final.pdf

⁴⁹ Interview with OPM official, Bidibidi settlements, May 7, 2018.

⁵⁰ The refugee population of Bidibidi is roughly 50 percent of the total population of Yumbe district prior to 2016.

⁵¹ Interview with senior government official, Odravu subcounty, April 25, 2018.

Land

Land is an emotional and divisive topic, steeped in issues related to resource sharing which ignites feelings of bitterness and perceptions of insecurity.⁵² It is further important to note that the host community has deep cultural and emotional ties to their land which extend far beyond the issue of resources and do not always present easy win-win conflict resolution solutions.⁵³

Conversations about land with members from the host community tended to focus on Ugandan actors — the host community and the government — and interlocutors did not seem directly concerned about the refugees and the land given to them. In contrast, the refugees interviewed were more concerned about sharing the land with the host community. Refugees also talked about how the land they were allocated was impossible to cultivate, either because it is too rocky to dig, too close to livestock who would eat their crops, or too far from their home base.

There are three main points of contention over the issue of land allocation. The first, broadly, is an issue of "appreciation" for the land that host communities either say they were promised or believe they deserve. This demand for "appreciation" is the driving contention. It is not a quarrel between the refugees and host community, but rather one between the host community and Ugandan authorities. The presence of the refugees and the issue of land is the catalyst for tensions between the Ugandan state and its citizens. This agitation among land chiefs for "appreciation" is primarily a desire for a more transactional relationship.⁵⁴ According to a senior government official:

"There's a need to prepare the mindset of our landlords. They have given land to refugees, but now they also want appreciation. And that appreciation must be tangible. The issue of appreciation to landlords must be resolved. They have families. If appreciation is not coming, then in the near future it will create conflict. You know the demand for money is unlimited, and it changes from time to time."⁵⁵

The second issue is related to cultural ties and practices. The host community asked OPM for funds to enable them to conduct rituals to bless the land. The money took a long time to source. Once it was arranged, clan leaders said it was not enough to buy the bull and other necessities for the ritual ceremony. An Aringa clan land chief explained:

"Sacrifice was required because that land was for hunting ground. Culturally here, when you hunt and get meat, that meat is eaten by the whole clan. Now that meat will be no more. Secondly, there are wild animals dangerous to human life. So the spirits need blessing from landowners to appease the spirits. Because spirit can come in form of wild animal. So that when these foreigners come nothing will happen to them or else we will be blamed as the host."⁵⁶

⁵² See for instance: 'Shrinking land opens new challenge facing South Sudanese refugees,' *The East African*, 10 September, 2017. Available at: <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Land-challenge-facing-South-Sudanese-refugees/2558-4089756-2o81rw/index.html>

⁵³ See below.

⁵⁴ This was also found to be the case in Adjumani. See Volsang, A. 2017 'Local Communities' Receptiveness to Host Refugees: A Case Study of Adjumani District in times of a South Sudanese Refugee Emergency.' Utrecht University Repository. Available at: <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/353562>

⁵⁵ Interview with senior government official, Odravu subcounty, April 25, 2018.

⁵⁶ Interview Wolo clan land chief, Odravu subcounty, April 26, 2018.

These traditional beliefs have also been used to try to keep refugees from using cultivation land allocated to them, as described further on. The third major contention over the issue of land is OPM's allocation to refugees of additional cultivation land, separate from the original allotment to each refugee. Due to overcrowding in Bidibidi, OPM was not able to allocate the 50x50 square metre plots to refugees in Bidibidi. Instead, refugee households received 30x30 plots. Due to Ugandan policy which aims to provide enough land to refugees to enable self-sustaining agriculture and livelihoods, OPM later requested extra land from the host communities to allocate for the refugees for cultivation. This extra cultivation land has proven particularly contentious, since some refugees say they have been threatened by host community members to not use the land.

Additionally, some of these newly allocated plots are several kilometres away from the settlements, requiring a half-day's walk just to reach them. Many refugees stated that instead of using this newly allocated land, they had, instead, made side arrangements with willing host community members for farming land. These side arrangements primarily involve versions of informal share-cropping or other forms of informal rent. Both positive and negative experiences were reported from these informal rent arrangements, with some cases of exploitation or extortion reported by refugees as the crop neared harvest. One Ugandan official recalled the chain of events:

"From day one, when we expected the influx, it was the OPM who came to Yumbe district local government to lobby for land to settle the refugees. Then it was lowered to our level at the sub-counties. Then we were told to identify the landlords. Then landlords were called for a meeting. And from that meeting were called to give vacant land for refugees. Now those areas were identified and refugees were settled. Then, after being settled, there was a need for refugees to be given land for cultivation. Landlords were called and asked for more pieces of land to give [to] refugees for cultivation."⁵⁷

Many refugees reported they did not use the new cultivation land because of fear of the host community, who had made it clear they had already given the refugees enough land. Many reported threats being issued against using the new land. One refugee said when the issue was raised to the OPM, "*They told us to be closer to the host. They told us to be friends with the host.*"⁵⁸

Another refugee from Village 12 said that she had neighbours who were permitted by the host community to cultivate on their land, but at harvest season were chased away.⁵⁹ Other refugees said that the host community asked the refugees for money or a part of their harvest as payback. One recounted: "*All of us were allocated some plots for cultivation. But when we went cultivating, the host family said no. They said this is their place for rearing their cattle. I heard them say openly that nobody is crossing to host land. If they want, they can buy from us. But how can we buy?*"⁶⁰

While some host community and local officials questioned refugee accounts that they were threatened not to cultivate on the allocated land, some land chiefs openly admitted that they refused refugees from cultivating the land. (Aringa often refer to the sub-clan elder overseeing communal land issues, usually a hereditary position passed down through a specific chiefly family, as the "land chief".) Land chiefs said that this was due to general community anger at OPM's handling of issues and their own desire for appreciation. Some host community members said that they had not received the benefit expected for agreeing to avail the original plot of land to the refugees.

⁵⁷ Interview with senior government official, Romogi subcounty, May 7, 2018.

⁵⁸ Interview with senior RWCI official April 25, 2018.

⁵⁹ FGD with refugee women in Village 12, Zone 1, April 28, 2018.

⁶⁰ Interview with senior RWCII official, Zone 4 Annex, Bidibidi, April 27, 2018.

Food assistance

In March 2018 the government rolled out a plan for biometric registration to replace the manual system and by April a refugee biometric verification exercise had begun. There have already been incidents of threats and intimidation by host community members to refugees over the biometric registration, as has been reported in the news media.⁶¹ In one particular case in April 2018 in Bidibidi, refugee leaders and authorities had to intervene after refugees began packing to leave following rumours that the host community was going to expel the refugees if biometric registration went ahead.⁶² One female refugee informant from Village 12 spoke of rumours that highlighted the transactional relationship between the host and refugee groups: *"I heard that they said that if they would be chased away from registration, then they will chase refugees from the land, because they gave it for free."*⁶³ Other refugees pointed out that there were fears that the host community would stop the refugees from accessing firewood or grass if they were removed from the refugee registration list. Another suggested rumours that the host community would come and take food rations at night if they were taken off the refugee registration.⁶⁴

Dialogues have been held with the host community to explain the process of biometric verification to mitigate these fears. The biometric registration, as designed, is focused on removing "ghost" or absent refugees, and not screening out host members registered as refugees. According to an agency worker, these dialogues have succeeded in reducing tensions over the biometric verification, which was planned for mid-2018 in Bidibidi. If biometric registration cuts refugee food rations, however, by removing duplicate cards or inflated household registrations, there is a risk of increased anger against host community members who remain on the refugee registrations. One refugee youth, for instance, claimed he instigated a physical altercation with a Ugandan aid worker during food distribution after the aid worker closely interrogated the refugee's status but allegedly allowed Lugbara speakers to pass:

They were asking so many questions. 'Is this really you on photo?' I showed them my national ID card. 'I tell you my story, and then you let someone who speaks your own language straight through? Don't talk to me. You know me.' I even slapped him."⁶⁵

One refugee representative saw host community members accessing food ration cards as an implicitly fair exchange for the refugees using their land. The leader said:

"The host community is there, but it is difficult to tell how many are getting food. Most are neighbours. During distribution, they are here, and they have their card. We don't know how they got the cards. But we don't say anything. We can't say. For me personally, I don't see it badly. It's like compensation for what they've done for us. If they stopped giving food to them, they'd stop our women going to get firewood. If it is for compensation for what was given to us, then ok."⁶⁶

Such sentiment is widespread. Refugees perceive an informal implicit contract: host community members expect access to refugee resources, including food, in exchange for hosting the refugees on their land. However, this understanding also suggests that any shift in the supply of this food assistance could change

⁶¹ VOA, 2018. South Sudan in Focus radio episode, May 7, 2018. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/4383157.html>

⁶² Interview with Ugandan national humanitarian worker, Yumbe town, May 5, 2018.

⁶³ FGD with refugee women in Village 12, Zone 1, April 28, 2018.

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ FGD with refugee male youth Village 12, Zone 1, April 28, 2018.

⁶⁶ Interview with refugee chief, Zone 4 Annex, Bidibidi, April 27, 2018.

this calculus — if refugees' rations are cut, resentment may increase against non-refugees receiving the rations. Meanwhile, if rations reaching the host community decline, it too may result in a shift in their perceived social contract with the refugee population. While donors and agencies seek to protect refugee assistance from fraud, they should also remain clear-eyed about the informal contracts which underlie refugee-host relations. Donors and their partners should directly and frankly evaluate the effects of any disruptions to these informal contracts, even when these informal relations contradict formal policies.

Development resources

Some local government officials and host representatives admitted that elements in the host community were choosing to be uncooperative on refugee issues due to grievances over “unmet promises”. In particular, local government officials and host representatives stressed repeatedly that unresolved issues between the host community and OPM had produced a backlash against the refugee presence within the host community.⁶⁷ Host communities were promised livelihood programmes that were yet to arrive, according to an OPM official.⁶⁸ This added to resentment towards Ugandan administrators, which indirectly negatively impacted on host-refugee relations.

In some cases, negative effects from the refugee presence and ensuing aid resources created low-levels of conflict. For instance, some roads have deteriorated from overuse since the refugees arrived, even though other roads have been built or improved. Local officials, in particular, noted that the infrastructure of the area was already severely underdeveloped. One Aringa humanitarian worker said that this had led to some backlash against refugees, suggesting that aid agencies should work with local officials to upkeep the roads they were using.⁶⁹

Conflicts within the Refugee Community

The refugee population of Bidibidi lives relatively peacefully among each other, despite the ethnic diversity of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, there have been isolated cases of ethnic conflict in the settlement related to the war in South Sudan. Low-level inter-personal strife is also widely reported, as would be expected given the trauma and hardships of uprooted and often broken households. Further, many refugees feared that future cuts in food aid would lead to wider hardship and difficult household dilemmas. This section will look at these three drivers of conflict.

Political

The politicisation of ethnicity has been a defining characteristic of the war in South Sudan which pushed the refugees into Uganda. However, ethnic conflict has been minor in the settlement. This is mainly because most of the settlement residents perceive their communities to be on the same “side” of the conflict — against the South Sudan government. Further, many, if not the bulk, of the refugees are believed to be from southern (former) Central Equatoria, inhabited by distinct ethnic groups which nevertheless share the Bari language.

The one major flashpoint in the refugee settlement is centred on a small population of ethnic Dinka. Most refugees associate ethnic Dinka groups with the government of President Salva Kiir, the leadership of the SPLA, and the ethnic Dinka “Mathiang Anyoor” military force deployed in parts of Equatoria in 2016. Many refugees blame these groups for destruction of their property, killing of friends or kin and forcing their displacement from their homes. As a result, ethnic Dinka have been particularly singled out and isolated

⁶⁷ This backlash appears primarily responsible for the threats and refusal by some host areas to accept the allocation of additional cultivation land for the refugees, as discussed above.

⁶⁸ Interview with OPM official. May 7, 2018, Bidibidi.

⁶⁹ Interview with Ugandan national humanitarian worker, Yumbe town, May 5, 2018.

from the rest of the South Sudanese refugee community.⁷⁰ There is a cluster of ethnic Dinka in Bidibidi in Village 12, Zone 1. According to a refugee representative involved in the situation, an OPM official approached the Village 12 refugee leadership in late 2016 after the Dinka were “chased” out of Bidibidi’s Zone 2. At the time, the village mostly comprised Central Equatorians. The Village 12 refugee community discussed the OPM request to relocate the Dinka to their area and, after some debate, ultimately agreed.⁷¹

Tensions over the Dinka presence have occasionally resulted in physical conflict, primarily due to harassment and assault on the Dinka refugees from other communities. In one incident in late 2017, Dinka women were attacked during a food distribution by a gang of youth, and one elderly woman was stabbed.⁷² Following this incident, there was a period of time in early 2018 in which a gang of youth would terrorise the Dinka cluster in Village 12 at night, stoning homes and looting. These incidents finally ceased after OPM organised a neighbourhood watch to patrol at night. Both Dinka and non-Dinka in Village 12 say that the situation has since improved.

The Dinka in Village 12 are primarily Dinka Bor, mostly previously living in Central Equatorial towns, particularly Kaya (see map on page 3). There have been some attempts by the RWCI chair to ease tensions by pointing out that the Dinka Bor were not involved in the government’s “Mathiang Anyoor” forces.⁷³ However, this nuance has not entirely removed the ethnic animosity. “*At first the people here [primarily Bari speakers] talked about them as Dinka generally, but now they came to understand they are Bor. But still this anger is there. That anger may continue for years,*” said a former non-Dinka refugee leader from Village 12.

Political spillovers from the war have caused some further conflict among refugees, though on a much less intense scale. For instance, intra-ethnic fighting and political divisions within the Acholi have caused the Panyikwara and Pajok clans to split into different areas of Bidibidi due to political differences within South Sudan.⁷⁴ There have also been tensions caused by competition and fighting inside South Sudan among opposition parties, although there were no direct incidents of conflict reported. For instance, when news spread about the fighting in October 2017 between the SPLA-IO and NAS forces in Kajo Keji, partisan rancour and bitterness prompted some tension.⁷⁵ A refugee leader said: “*When we heard the news about the NAS [National Salvation Front]-IO fighting, the mood changed. Like one day we may talk friendly [to each other] and then after that we’re not friendly.*”⁷⁶ If political coalitions in South Sudan shift, inter-ethnic dynamics in the refugee population would also be expected to shift. Therefore, the political dynamics in South Sudan require close watching.

Inter-personal

Respondents attributed many of the inter-personal conflicts within Bidibidi to the skewed demographic: there are significantly more women than men in the settlement. According to refugee respondents, men are substantially more likely to have stayed behind in South Sudan due to employment, to watch over cattle or as participants in the armed conflict. Refugees described a prevalent attitude of men staying behind in the war but sending women and children to safety in Uganda. Furthermore, with the economic collapse in South Sudan, men struggled to support their households, causing some families to split.

The disparity in gender in Bidibidi influences both refugee interactions and domestic conflict. There are many women living in the settlement without their husbands which can lead to personal entanglements. For instance, men may come to visit Bidibidi to find their wife with another man. Adultery also leads to

⁷⁰ See also Volsang, A. 2017 ‘Local Communities’ Receptiveness to Host Refugees: A Case Study of Adjumani District in times of a South Sudanese Refugee Emergency.’ MA thesis, Utrecht University Repository. Available at: <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/353562>

⁷¹ Interview with former RWCI official, Zone 1, Bidibidi, April 28, 2018.

⁷² Interview with former RWCI official, Zone 1, Bidibidi, April 28, 2018.

⁷³ The Mathiang Anyoor were composed of ethnic Dinka from Bahr el Ghazal. Dinka Bor elite are meanwhile divided politically, with some in the political opposition.

⁷⁴ A senior general in the SPLA, Johnson Juma Okot, is Panyikwara, while Oyet Nathaniel, the appointed SPLA-IO governor-general of the area is Pajok. Fighting between the SPLA and SPLA-IO in the Acholi have strong overtones of intra-Acholi clan warfare.

⁷⁵ NAS is the National Salvation Front (NAS), a rival opposition group created in 2017 by Thomas Cirillo.

⁷⁶ Interview with senior RWCI official, Zone 4 Annex, Bidibidi, April 27, 2018.

conflict among women. Family units and traditional household dynamics have been disrupted. Adultery is perceived to be widespread in the settlements. This leads to substantial inter-personal conflict and domestic abuse, according to women and refugee leaders interviewed for this study. Depression, anxiety and trauma from events witnessed and experienced in South Sudan are also serious problems,⁷⁷ in addition to stress about money and alcoholism.⁷⁸ There is little programmatic support for refugees' psychological health.⁷⁹

Resources

Ethnic favouritism also comes into play in the distribution of goods or in allocating access to water points. In one refugee village, for example, a community leader mentioned that incidents of inter-personal conflicts between ethnic communities at a refugee water point diminished substantially after the creation of an additional borehole. This suggests that the real trigger of this conflict was scarcity, not ethnic animosity.⁸⁰

As discussed previously, biometric registration poses risks of additional conflict: reducing duplicate ration cards among refugees decreases resources, raising the potential for inter-personal conflict among refugees and even the decision to return back to South Sudan. Informants admitted that many refugees hold multiple refugee cards due to a black market for refugee cards (allegedly the black market price for a refugee card for a family of 10 was 100,000 Ugandan shillings, of 9 was 90,000 shillings, etc.). The refugees usually exchange the extra rations for cash used to diversify the diet and purchase non-food items. If rations are reduced and cause household stress, it is likely to lead to an increase in interpersonal conflicts among the refugee population as well as to, potentially, some returns to the conflict zones of South Sudan. Cutting these rations would produce a ripple effect on livelihoods and household cohesion, potentially leading to unintended disputes and conflicts difficult to predict in advance.

Conflicts within the Host Community

Around the world, refugee sites are often located in peripheral borderlands with limited state control where the host population feels politically marginalised or disconnected from the state. The arrival of such vast numbers of refugees in Yumbe district has sparked a string of multi-layered conflicts within the host community over resources, boundaries and jurisdiction. It has also opened up a new front in contestation between the Yumbe communities and the national government. In some interviews, host members stressed repeatedly that their most salient grievances were not against the refugees but rather against the Ugandan government and its refugee administration. This subsection will look at issues of land, demands for compensation or appreciation, and tensions caused by contestation over development resources.

Land disputes

The Bidibidi settlements are located on communal land of the Aringa people, which is governed by customary laws. In general, communal land falls under the control of the specific clan with historical claim to the area. Under this system, each clan has a designated "land chief" responsible for speaking on behalf of the community on matters related to communal land.

⁷⁷ Amnesty International, 2016. "Our Hearts Have Gone Dark": The Mental Health Impact of South Sudan's Conflict. 6 July, 2016. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR6532032016ENGLISH.PDF>

⁷⁸ UNHCR, 2018. 'Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan: The integrated response plan for refugees from South Sudan, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.' Available at: <https://ugandarefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/Uganda-I-RRP-2018pdf.pdf>

⁷⁹ Amnesty International, 2017. "Help Has Not Reached Me Here," 18 June, 2017. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr59/6422/2017/en/>

⁸⁰ Interview with senior RWCII official, Zone 4 Annex, Bidibidi, April 27, 2018.

Most of Bidibidi is on land that was little used prior to the refugees' arrival, known as hunting grounds, that was not considered suitable for agriculture. Besides hunting, these areas also support livestock grazing and charcoal production — critical livelihood activities for some of the host population.

The customary nature of land rights results in adjudication on an "as needed" basis since the knowledge of land rights is not institutionalised or written down. Because the land which forms the Bidibidi settlements was primarily unsettled, communal and under-utilised, some underlying disputes over land use rights between individuals or boundaries between sub-clans have surfaced due to the arrival of the refugees. These are manifested over two forms of conflict: (a) the perceived benefit of land claims near the refugee sites, such as renting land to refugees for cultivation or negotiating land use rights with implementing humanitarian partners who need additional land for building or for activities; and (b) the negative effects on those previously using the land for livelihood purposes, primarily charcoal production, grazing and hunting. For instance, several interviewees brought up a boundary dispute between Odravu and Kululu sub-counties (see map on page 3), which is also in origin a boundary dispute between two sub-clans. The dispute has complicated the implementation of relief programmes, including the building of a health facility, since the two sub-counties and their respective land chiefs cannot agree on who has the right to approve the development projects.

The land chief role is described as primarily hereditary on a sub-clan basis. In some cases, disputes have risen in the land chief family over who has the right to speak as land chief, especially in cases where the designated land chief is sick or senile. In many cases, the land chief is also illiterate, in which case educated sons may attempt to speak on the family's behalf. In other cases, regular citizens will claim land ownership rights over areas near refugee sites but without documentation. There were many complaints from the host community of agencies allegedly negotiating with someone falsely claiming individual rights to the land when, in fact, they were only allowed "land user" rights on what is ultimately communal sub-clan land.

OPM blames some of this confusion for delaying implementation of some development projects for the host community. "If you go to the host community right now, everyone is a landlord. They will all say they are landlords. Everyone wants to be consulted. Can you consult everyone in the village?" exclaimed one OPM official.⁸¹ To try and mitigate this, OPM has been trying to institute a formal structure to the land chiefs. OPM is working through a Yumbe landowners chairman, who is assisting setting up land chief committees composed of the rightful clan representatives at the sub-county levels. However, this, too, is not without controversy. Some question the land chair's legitimacy, and the land chair's negotiation for the additional cultivation land for refugees has proven contentious.

Land issues have also added to frictions between the local district government and the refugee administration. One district councilor felt that although OPM first approached district level authorities to request land to create Bidibidi in 2016, the district local government later felt sidelined by the refugee administration when additional land was needed for cultivation. Aringa representatives also noted a rise of rumours and suspicion that the central government or politically-connected Ugandan elite were looking to take advantage of the refugee crisis in order to grab land. They suggested that this had played a role in the community's lack of full cooperation on providing additional refugee land for cultivation, as well as overall damaging host perceptions of OPM.

"Appreciation" and Unmet Expectations

Host community representatives gave different responses about whether or not they were promised anything specific in exchange for giving the land. Some said that the land was given freely, only that once they saw some of the negative aspects of hosting refugees they expected some "appreciation" for the host community's generosity. The repeated use of the word "appreciation," rather than compensation, is also indicative of a host community that is not asking for in-kind payment for the land. However, other representatives of the host community said that they believed that there were promises or expectations that had gone unmet. Several expressed frustration that they struggled to get OPM to meet directly to discuss some of the community's requests and concerns.⁸² In turn, one OPM official explained that his

⁸¹ Interview with OPM official, Bidibidi, May 7, 2018.

⁸² Interviews Aringa land chiefs and local officials.

office was constrained in its ability to fulfill all of its commitments due to resource deficits and ambiguity over land rights.⁸³

There were also rumours within the host community that leaders and elders had been compensated, but that payment had not trickled down. Some respondents believed that local politicians and elite were agitating the Aringa elders and land chiefs against OPM, for their own benefit.⁸⁴ Such allegations are indicative of the level of mistrust as a result of the new perceived scramble for benefits. This suspicion can disempower clan elders and delegitimise original agreements to grant communal land for refugee settlement. For instance, one land chief said:

“Actually, the coming of the refugees for me as an individual is a very big problem with the community. As much as the refugees themselves are peaceful and settled, now the greatest conflict is between me and the rest of the neighbouring clans and my own people. Because some of them believe that something was given to me secretly.”⁸⁵

Beyond fiscal compensation for land given or damages incurred, there is also a need to dignify and acknowledge local leadership structures. One land chief commented that he no longer is able to perform other traditional duties since his time is now taken up with disputes over the land allocated to the refugees. In one case, the chief was being sued by another clan who accused him of giving away land that was rightfully its.

In discussions with host community representatives, one repeated request was “appreciation” for the land chiefs, who were nearly all very elderly and often impoverished. Specifically, land chiefs requested or were said to request a motorbike or fuel reimbursement for the travel conducted to adjudicate the new disputes arising from the refugee presence. Another repeated request was for a permanent home for the elderly land chief. This was also, at times, expressed as a matter of respect towards the community elders. Said one host community representative:

“For us to accept the refugees to cultivate that land demarcated for refugees, we want them to come give something as appreciation to the mzee [elder].⁸⁶ Look at him at that age. Additionally, we want the nursery school for children to be brought to our side because the primary school and hospital are on that side. We also want the secondary school on this side, so two in each.”⁸⁷

Competition for resources

The competition for livelihood and development programmes, combined with the expectations of compensation for land use and an interpretation of the “30% rule”, has also produced jockeying between individuals, clans and local institutions.

For instance, one local official at the sub-county level said that competition for the host allocation of its “30%” had led to competition between villages and communities to attract resources. In one case, the official said, he was surprised to find that a community had negotiated directly with an NGO and secured a development project without his knowledge. This can lead to competition between officials, between different levels of local governments and between different neighbouring villages. In such scenarios, some

⁸³ Interview with OPM official, Bidibidi, May 7, 2018.

⁸⁴ Interview with humanitarian worker.

⁸⁵ Interview with Wolo sub-clan elder on April 26, 2018.

⁸⁶ Mzee is a Swahili term denoting someone of old age, usually denoting respect.

⁸⁷ FGD with Voku subclan elders, April 30, 2018.

elements of the host community could perceived themselves as unfair “losers” of the refugee presence and instigate conflict.

There is also a low-intensity disagreement among the levels of local government over control of anticipated and actual aid resources. Representatives of LCI, LCIII, and LCV interviewed in Yumbe district all argued that the “30%” of aid projects destined for the host community should be targeted to and controlled by the hosting village, sub-county and district, respectively. The ambiguity of and lack of transparency in the “30% rule” has prevented more overt conflict over these resources, however — in effect, there is some distribution of the 30% across all levels of the local governments, and coordination with officials on all levels, without completing alienating any level of government or clarifying which officials or local councils are entitled to the development projects. Resolving these ambiguities could create “winner-take-all” effects which could spark more conflict. Even so, the current status quo — with unclear benchmarks and guidelines of how the 30% will be distributed — will require continuous monitoring and engagement.

Bridging Divides

This section will examine activities and relations that bridge the communities of Bidibidi and mitigate conflict. The section first examines relationship-building and conflict resolution mechanisms between the refugee and host communities, followed by an investigation of existing adjudication and conflict resolution mechanisms within the refugee population. Following this, the section offers specific recommendations for strengthening these ties and conflict mitigation mechanisms.

Bridging Refugee-Host Divides

Dialogues facilitated by aid organisations such as DRC and ZOA tend to be the short-term mechanism employed for solving disputes both within and between the refugees and hosts. These are usually coordinated between the parallel levels of authority — between the LCI and RWCI, LCII and RWCII, and LCIII and RWCIII, and can also include other influential members of the respective communities, including religious authorities.

The disputes, as outlined above, are most commonly over issues of access to firewood and resolutions to particular disputes or incidents that may arise, such as harassment of refugees by members of the host community, damage caused by host community's livestock, or on sharing use and access to refugee settlement resources, such as boreholes. Other issues including additional land to refugees for cultivation and rumours surrounding the biometric refugee registration have also required dialogues between the communities.

People interviewed for this study spoke favourably of the talks and said these had served to reach understanding on matters that would have otherwise resulted in lingering resentment, or generated solutions that satisfied all parties more equitably. Opinion was divided among both refugee and host community respondents about whether these dialogues should continue on an ad hoc basis or established as more formal meeting groups. One senior government official also suggested having separate meetings strictly for leaders of the different communities.⁸⁸ However, there also appeared to be some disconnect between the leadership of both communities and the regular members of refugee and host communities. While the leadership participating in the dialogues overall praised their efficacy, community members were often unaware of the outcome of these meetings and expressed less conviction that these dialogues have resolved issues or strengthened the relationships between the communities.

There was also a clear gender imbalance that did not reflect the nature of some of the disputes. While most of the RWC leaders were male, women make up the bulk of the adult refugee population and some of the most contentious issues, such as insecurity in the collection of firewood, predominantly affects women. The male leadership of the refugee councils widely downplayed, sometimes dismissively, the hardships faced by women compared to the accounts provided directly by women themselves.

While dialogues play a key role in mitigating and resolving conflicts and disputes, many of the refugees and host community members highlighted interpersonal interactions at the market or other informal gatherings as the foundation for increasing links between the communities.

In many bordering refugee-host areas, the market is the most organic meeting place for the two communities. Refugees and the host community also repeatedly cited joint farming groups, established by DRC, as creating relationships that served as bridges between the two sides. When discussing new bonds, both refugee and host respondents often stressed attending each other's funerals and weddings as important markers of social ties. These ties are critical both for challenging negative stereotypes, but also for helping refugee networks negotiate directly with the host neighbours on a personal basis. Football is also a common means of interaction between male youth. Refugees said that host and refugee youth often came together to watch football on television and play football, usually on Bidibidi pitches. Concurrently, there were also limited cases of sports causing division either because host communities were barred from playing in the refugee camps or because competitive sports games led to quarrelling.

⁸⁸ Interview with senior government official, April 25, 2018.

This kind of intermingling and interactions has resulted in improved communication and understanding among the two communities. Anecdotally, in one focus group discussion with refugee youth, four out of twelve participants indicated they had learned to speak some Lugbara since arriving.⁸⁹

Recommendations for strengthening conflict resolution between host and refugee communities

- *Dialogues should continue to be supported.* Implementers should continue to listen to the refugee and host leaderships to design programmes that suit their needs and support their legitimacy and leadership. Some issues, especially regarding natural resource management, should be reframed as long-term processes requiring collective engagement rather than a problem to be immediately solved.
- *Focus on shared interests.* The main bridge between refugees and their hosts is the informal understanding of mutual benefit. The refugees understand that they need good relations with the host community. The host community chose to lobby for the refugee presence in order to attract development and aid resources. While the political economy of refugee settlements involves some contestation, they also provide many areas for potential positive-sum, win-win benefit. These include jobs, stronger markets, improved infrastructure and access to shared services such as school and healthcare. The “30%” rule of thumb, even if vague and contested, is thus a positive. The host community understands that they are designed to benefit directly from the refugee presence. Implementing partners should seek to proactively ensure that host communities continue to think they are receiving a net-benefit from the refugee presence. The strongest tie between refugee and hosts are shared interests.
- The humanitarian community should consider other ways of more explicitly tying communities together. For instance, some have proposed cash transfers programmes to refugees.⁹⁰ This could be expanded to directly benefit host communities as well. Critically, this should also be pitched as not merely a “transactional” compensation for hosting refugees but also as a means to counteract the negative impacts that studies have shown are tied to hosting refugees.⁹¹
- *Strengthen existing interactions.* Many refugees and host community members stressed interpersonal interactions as foundational for building relations and trust across the communities. In particular, shared markets, football activities and farming groups were identified as creating bonds which could grow into greater integration and cohesion. Implementing partners should seek to support these activities and related public spaces.
- *Provide legal training.* Refugees, overall, expressed skepticism about using formal law enforcement for resolving conflicts with the host community due to the deep insecurity of being a refugee and skepticism that legal avenues to address crime would result in justice. Greater emphasis should be given to strengthening relations between South Sudanese refugees and the Ugandan law enforcement authorities. Refugees also need education and sensitisation towards their new legal and security environment.
- *Addressing host-authorities misunderstanding/tensions as a separate driver.* While dialogues can resolve some disputes, in other cases the underlying dispute is not between the hosts and refugees but rather between the hosts and Ugandan authorities. In such cases, refugee-host dialogues are described as treating the symptoms of the problem, unable to ever fully resolve the issue.
- Both refugee and host community interviewees said that some deterioration in host and refugee relations, especially over issues of land, is driven at its core by anger among the host community at unmet expectations or perceived marginalisation by Ugandan authorities. In this case, some host

⁸⁹ FGD with 12 refugee male youth, Zone 4 Annex, Village 8.

⁹⁰ See Bailey, S. “Why not cash? The case for cash transfers for refugees in Mozambique.” Overseas Development Institute. Available at: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11281.pdf>

⁹¹ See OECD 2001; Maystadt and Verwimp 2009.

community leaders recognised they had obstructed refugee programmes with the goal of gaining an audience with or leverage with Ugandan authorities to press for their demands or grievances. A separate parallel process should be encouraged to resolve these drivers of conflict.

- *Realign expectations on the role of refugee-host dialogues.* Some conflicts will not likely be resolved through dialogues. This is especially true of issues related to access to natural resources and environmental degradation. The biomass need of the Bidibidi settlements in the form of firewood and grass will strip away and degrade their surrounding environment while also negatively affecting the livelihood options of neighbours, including grazing and charcoal production.
- It should not be a surprise, then, that access to firewood continues to be a challenging flashpoint between the two communities. Authorities and implementing partners should strongly consider other structural solutions to the problem, such as supplying or supplementing cooking biomass or formalising access to gazetted firewood collection zones which can be rotated under conservation management.
- Additionally, a shift in framing should be encouraged emphasising that these are problems to be managed rather than disputes to be resolved. When dialogues fail to resolve these disputes, there is a tendency for communities to lose faith in the dialogue process or their leaders. Meanwhile, the refugee and host leaderships can likewise acquire issue fatigue if repeated attempts to resolve these kinds of conflicts have failed to end the issue. Reframing the disputes over natural resources as a problem to be managed would stress long-term engagement as a precondition for success rather than an indication of failure.
- *Promote female empowerment.* The refugee male leadership is often a poor representative and advocate for the women of Bidibidi. There should be a greater emphasis on promoting women's leadership, especially over issues predominantly affecting women, such as the collection of firewood.

Resolving Conflict between Refugees

The primary formal means of conflict resolution in the camps are the village-level RWCI, which are also supplemented with a 'Complaint Desk' where refugees can bring their problems to the attention of their local leaders or of other relevant authorities. There is often a special role for the senior elder on the council. Other times, other elders, traditional leaders or religious leaders engage in informal dispute resolution.

While few refugees expressed major reservations about this system, many also expressed low expectations that the complaint desk or the RWCs would effectively resolve conflicts. This was primarily due to distrust in the capacity of the RWCs to resolve conflicts or take interest in the matter. There is a widespread sentiment that reporting issues to the Complaint Desk does not lead to follow-up. Therefore, many cases, refugees said, go unreported. Refugees seemed most likely to take an issue to the Complaint Desk or RWCs if a) they felt it needed the intervention of authorities to resolve, and b) they had some confidence that the refugee leadership could act on the matter.

Further, RWCs possess inconsistent levels of competence and motivation across the settlements; the positions are unpaid and voluntary, and some of the RWC members complain they are expected to work too much without any compensation. While in South Sudan, traditional courts overseen by traditional authorities charge court fees, this practice is barred in the Ugandan settlements. Since this practice is deeply embedded in many South Sudanese communities, care should be taken that such well-meaning restrictions do not simply drive the practice of traditional courts underground and out of view.

Many refugees expressed preference for informal means of conflict resolution, primarily through elders, traditional leaders or community ethnic councils. The most usual approach is to seek the mediation of a local elder and, if that fails, proceed to ethnicity-based leadership councils. For instance, the Bari speaking ethnic groups of Central Equatoria have elected a Bari-speaking council. The Nuer, Shilluk, and other ethnic groups also have leadership structures in the settlements, often elected and with rotating or shared leadership. These community structures are used to adjudicate intra-communal disputes but seem to play an even more crucial role in de-escalating inter-communal conflicts in the camps which could otherwise

spiral negatively into inter-ethnic violence. In the case of conflict between members of two different ethnic groups, for instance, the leadership of the two communities will often meet directly and informally to resolve the situation.

Recommendations for strengthening conflict resolution within the Bidibidi refugee population

- *Informal Traditional or Ethnic Mechanisms.* NGO staff tend to interact primarily with the formal mechanisms and structures (RWCs, for instance) and appear to have less knowledge of and engagement with informal mechanisms and structures (i.e. ethnic/communal leadership chairs and councils). Ensuring staff have an understanding of these informal mechanisms will allow for more sustainable approaches and generate a sense of understanding between implementing partners and the refugees and host community.

Due to the ethnic overtones of the conflict in South Sudan, there has been a well-meaning effort by the Ugandan authorities and some implementing partners to de-emphasise the role of South Sudan's traditional communities in the settlements. This is sometimes manifested through a diminutive use of the word "tribe" to describe South Sudan's ethnic communities among Ugandan authorities and implementing partners. This narrows and misunderstands the broad role that ethnic and community structures play in South Sudan. This approach can also miss the positive roles that traditional authorities and dispute mechanisms can play. This risks driving these activities out of view and undermining, rather than complementing, the elected refugee representatives.

Humanitarian staff should be trained about and sensitised to the role of communal social support and justice structures. While the motivation to prevent an ethnic balkanisation of the settlement is understandable, ethnic support structures are deeply embedded and underpin South Sudanese resilience, capacity for self-governance and grassroots accountability — all of which should be promoted, not discouraged, in the refugee context.

- *Training and Teaching about Ugandan Legal Context.* South Sudanese refugees do not come from a lawless society; however, they have experienced much different contexts for law and order from the Ugandan context. Some fled from towns, such as Yei, where law enforcement was once relatively orderly. Others have lived entirely in rural areas where state law enforcement is very weak. Many South Sudanese also have an extremely negative experience towards state law enforcement agencies such as police, which were often predatory, incapacitated and politicised. Traditional chief courts play a continuing role in South Sudan's local judicial systems.

All of these factors mean that South Sudanese refugees will likely hold understandable skepticism towards Ugandan police and security agencies, both in terms of effectiveness and fairness. There is also a significant gap in understanding Ugandan law and the difference between criminal and non-criminal offences.

Training should focus on educating RWC members, as well as other key members of the refugee community, on basic parameters of Ugandan law, building trust with law enforcement agencies so that cases of criminality and violence can be identified and adjudicated legally.

- *Empowering Women.* As noted above, women form the majority of the adult population yet are underrepresented in refugee leadership structures. This is especially problematic given that many of the interpersonal issues requiring adjudication in the Bidibidi settlements disproportionately affect women, such as domestic violence, domestic disputes and conflicts at congested water points and distribution centres. More effort should be undertaken to establish female-to-female reporting, support and resolution structures.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Bidibidi settlement is primarily a success story: the Ugandan government and relief partners swiftly responded to an emergency crisis of nearly unprecedented scale, all the while negotiating local politics and mobilising emergency relief. The South Sudan populations in Bidibidi, with some notable exceptions, have integrated together relatively peaceably. There is no overriding narrative of conflict between the refugees and the host community from either community. These are significant positive findings.

Still, this report highlights ongoing drivers and potential triggers of conflict which deserve attention. In particular, there are outstanding issues over land and natural resources. Furthermore, the aid resources serve to bridge but also divide the host and refugee populations. There are also widening and worrying fissures revolving around the politics and grievances of hosting refugees which could widen if left unaddressed.

The 2016 massive arrival of refugees required an emergency response that continued through 2017, establishing and stabilising refugee administration and humanitarian response. There is now an opportunity to lay the groundwork for longer-term stability and peaceful relations with a view towards a likely long-term refugee presence in Yumbe district. Some further steps are recommended to shore up this stability, improve relations between all communities, and prevent any backsliding into conflict in Bidibidi and its surrounds.

This paper concludes with general recommendations for conflict sensitivity programming in Bidibidi and Yumbe district based on the findings of this study. These conclusions are to complement and not repeat the more specific conflict mitigation recommendations in the previous section.

General Recommendations for Conflict Sensitivity Programming:

- Proactively programme to make hosting refugees a positive-sum win for the hosting community. This 'win-win' situation will only arise with intentional, coordinated policies to link shared benefits and prevent the negative impacts. Both reality and perception matter greatly, so relief programmes should be designed to both widely distribute benefits and effectively dialogue with stakeholders regarding their effects.
- Consider "informal contracts" between the refugee and host populations when cutting back on resources or other shifts that will affect the refugee political economy. This is especially true for the most significant aid item, food relief.
- Agencies and implementing partners should take care not to undermine the existing communal land system, such as by undermining or alienating the traditional land chiefs in the subclans, whose cooperation and goodwill in hosting refugees is critical.
- Encourage resolution of the additional allocation of cultivation land, which has largely failed due to distance from settlements and hostility from the host community stemming from grievances about resource allocation.
- Consider structural solutions to the firewood issue rather than ad hoc resolution mechanisms. These include formal designated rotating zones with conservation and replanting schemes for the host community. Another solution would be providing the refugees with biofuel, however this would weaken a cash and livelihood source for both refugee and host communities.
- Agencies and implementing partners should work to minimise downsides to the host community for hosting the refugees, such as by repairing and upgrading feeder roads which have degraded from overuse.
- Agencies should work to identify and mitigate unintended effects to the political economy which produce net benefits which accrue to some winners but produce clear losers who can emerge as drivers of present or future conflict against the refugee population.

- Agencies should be careful not to instigate conflict between communities. While some competition for resources is inevitable, this could be mitigated by coordinating with levels of authority, starting with the LCV and down to the LCI. This places the responsibility for responding to grievances on local authorities without undermining their authority.
- While the general ambiguity regarding the loose application of the “30 percent” rule has helped prevent direct conflict within the host community over competition for aid resources, this unformalised system will require constant management and attention to continue preventing clear winners and losers from emerging as a conflict driver.
- The refugee population has experienced severe trauma. Personal mental illness can easily cause wider disputes or violent incidents if left untreated. Agencies should work to extend mental health care and services to the refugee population.