

Peaceful Co-existence Taskforce

Impact of COVID-19 and related measures on peaceful co-existence between communities

This note provides a summary overview of information gathered by members of the Peaceful Co-existence Taskforce of the Uganda refugee operation regarding the impact of COVID-19 and related measures on peaceful co-existence between communities. The inputs by members¹ were collected through a variety of sources, including information by agency staff and their interactions with partners, community structures, and community members. The note covers Yumbe, Adjumani, Arua, Kiryandongo, Kyangwali, Kyaka, Rwamwanja, Nakivale, Oruchinga, and Kampala. It reflects the situation as of May 2020 in the settlements, while the information related to Kampala was compiled in June 2020.

1. Impact of COVID-19 on relations between communities

Although causes for tensions / conflicts between refugee and host communities as well as among refugee communities existed prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, there were reports of tensions having been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 crisis. Opportunities for interaction between communities through social and economic activities have significantly reduced. Closure of places of worship has also had an impact, as people coming together to pray plays an important role in strengthening social cohesion and promoting positive social behaviour. Increased idleness of youth, owing to closure of schools and businesses, has also led to increased fighting among the youth and impacted negatively on the community.

COVID-19 measures have restricted community engagement, meetings, consultations and religious gatherings, which have traditionally been used by the community to discuss and address issues of common interest and concern. The COVID-19 lockdown has brought a number of peace-building and social cohesion interventions to a standstill. An example is the peace clubs which are predominantly comprised of school going children and activities are conducted at schools. Many peaceful co-existence activities are carried out through a communal approach involving gatherings and interaction among people, which are not feasible in the current COVID-19 context.

COVID-19 mitigation measures such as movement restrictions have also reduced / limited the presence of authorities and key community leaders who usually intervene in a timely manner to deter or resolve conflicts, creating a gap in handling tensions at an early stage and preventing them from escalating into conflicts. In such instances, key community leaders were called upon to intervene only after the situation became violent. Police officers are also overstretched between doing their regular police duties and enforcing COVID-19 preventive measures.

Relations between Refugee and Host Communities

The information gathered suggests that the COVID-19 crisis has had both negative and positive impact on relations between refugee and host communities.

Before the pandemic, refugees and host communities used to interact at small trading centres, markets and social events, which provided opportunities for them to exchange information, bond and build relationships. However, opportunities for such interaction have significantly reduced due to prohibition of large gatherings, social distancing and movement restrictions, and fear of transmission of COVID-19. The pandemic has also

¹ Alight, BRAC, DCA, NRC, UNHCR.

affected business for both refugees and host communities who are not able to make business transactions. Refugees approaching host community members to hire agricultural land have also reduced.

Due to movement restrictions, refugees are unable to travel long distances to work or find resources and are forced to find resources accessible to them, which in most cases is in host community areas. In the Arua region, it was reported that this has resulted in clashes over natural resources like firewood and roofing grass. In Adjumani, there is ongoing conflict over land for farming and grazing cattle which may rise further, due to increased competition over land given the reduction of food rations and start of the farming season and exacerbated by reduced presence of law enforcement.

In Kyaka II, it was reported that COVID-19 movement restrictions have affected access to services outside of the settlement, particularly those that are jointly utilized or shared by both refugee and host communities. It was reported in the Arua region that, if a Ugandan national visits a health facility in refugee settlements, they face stigmatization as they are considered to be importing COVID-19 to the refugee community.

Perceptions by host community members that refugees are privileged and better served due to access to facilities in settlements, can also exacerbate tensions if left unaddressed. Host communities may consider refugees as adding pressure to already scarce resources, which are strained even further with COVID-19. Host community members may start questioning why refugees are entitled to certain services (e.g. food rations) while they are equally suffering from the effects of COVID-19 measures. In Kyaka II, host community members indicated that activities for awareness-raising on COVID-19 in their villages are limited compared to activities in the settlement, which may result in perception that refugees are prioritized over nationals.

Additionally, in the South-West region, the fact that two refugees contracted COVID-19 initially raised concern among host community members who blamed refugees for bringing risks of COVID-19 into the community². In Nakivale, it was reported that refugees seeking labour / livelihood opportunities in the host community for labour / livelihood opportunities were rejected because of the presence of people affected by COVID-19 in the settlement. Similarly, suspicion and mistrust have been reported between refugees and host communities in Yumbe because relatives of South Sudanese refugees have reportedly arrived in the settlement from South Sudan. Tensions have also been experienced between refugees and host communities in Adjumani due to entry of refugees and other south Sudanese nationals through the porous borders into Uganda, many of whom were held by host community leaders and accused of bringing COVID-19 into the country.

In Adjumani, it was reported that the reduced presence of police and public from the streets encouraged thefts and other similar criminal activities, as a result of which refugees and host communities exchanged accusations of who was behind those crimes, leading to increased tensions between the two communities.

On the other hand, some locations reported that COVID 19 has had some positive impact on the relations between refugee and host communities, in that they have come together to work in sensitization and implementation of directives of the Ministry of Health to help prevent transmission of the virus. Both communities have a collective responsibility to report new arrivals and visitors who may have COVID-19, as community members feel the sense of protecting each other within their villages. Another good example is evidenced at community trading centres and small food markets where both communities have respected guidelines for social distancing and hand washing.

In Kampala, due to the perception at the outset of the pandemic that COVID-19 was brought into the country by foreigners coming from abroad, host community members were reported to have targeted refugees as

² However, as noted below under “Relations among Refugee Communities”, these two refugees were successfully re-integrated into their communities after discharge, further to concerted efforts by all concerned actors to prepare and sensitize the communities.

foreigners spreading COVID-19. Urban refugees of two nationalities reported that they were falsely reported to police by Ugandan nationals that they (the refugees) were suspected of having COVID-19, which caused tensions between the refugee and host community members. Additionally, a number of reports were received that Ugandan nationals disseminated information in the community that DRC refugees were spreading COVID-19, triggering violent attacks on refugees in some instances. Additionally, refugees in Kampala initially benefited equally from the Government's food distribution, until information circulated about UNHCR's plans to provide cash assistance to refugees. Refugees also indicated that the level of theft seems to have increased but that police were not providing assistance to refugees except for those who can pay money, owing to the perception that refugees have money provided by UNHCR and partners. In addition, many refugees who normally reside in settlements were trapped in Kampala due to lockdown and forged ways of survival which put them in constant conflict with the host community. Interactions with police indicated that the local community expressed frustration with refugees in their communities, alleging that refugees are alleged to be involved in theft as a means of survival. Furthermore, refugees reported tensions with landlords who demanded payment of three month rent during the lockdown and that landlords are evicting them due to failure to pay rent.

Relations among Refugee Communities

While root causes for tensions / conflicts pre-existed prior to COVID-10 with its origins in the political and ethnic / tribal cleavages that triggered armed conflict in the country of origin, the information gathered suggests that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated tensions and conflict among groups within refugee communities.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, opportunities for strengthening community relationships, such as sports, recreational and cultural events, weddings, and birth ceremonies have been suspended due to social distancing and movement restriction measures. Reduced social interaction has resulted in a reduction in information-sharing and to some extent dismantling of traditional systems to handle issues in the community. Closure of places of worship and increased idleness of youth have impacted negatively on peaceful relations as already noted above. Relationship-building through social interactions between families, such as through children playing, have also reduced. As a result of the lockdown, most people limit their daily interactions to family members and close circle of acquaintances, which does not support the promotion of the spirit of openness and inter-communal dialogue.

COVID-19 measures have restricted community meetings used by the community to discuss and address issues of common interest and concern. For example, after clashes in Kiryandongo and O3 Zones of Rhino Camp erupted, it was difficult to hold integrated village meetings and community policing, and community dialogues to reach resolutions and foster peaceful coexistence.

Increased costs of living due to rise in food prices were also reported to have created anxiety, desperation, and mistrust within households, resulting in arguments. Limited movements and business have caused tensions within the communities and families leading to increased cases of domestic violence.

In settlements receiving new arrivals such as Kyangwali, it was reported that the already settled refugees do not allow the recently arrived refugees to pick vegetables from their gardens due to concerns about food security and uncertainty of livelihood opportunities in the COVID-19 context.

In Bidibidi, it was reported that Pojulu and Kuku ethnicities have been affected by stigma from other ethnic groups in the community, because many relatives of Pojulu and Kuku refugees joined them from South Sudan giving rise to fears of COVID-19. Also in Bidibidi, implementation of some COVID-19 measures, such as quarantining people, has created some conflict between the community and the Chairperson of one village, due to misunderstanding that the people were being forcefully taken to prison. In Nakivale, the requirement

to report on visitors who are not known to the community and placing them in the isolation / quarantine centres initially caused tensions amongst tribes within the community, as the community believed that they were reported on the basis of their tribes.

On a positive note, the two refugees who were confirmed to be positive with COVID-19 and were discharged after recovery were successfully re-integrated into their communities in Nakivale, after considerable preparatory work by authorities, UNHCR and partners in sensitizing their families and communities.

One partner operating in the West Nile region noted that COVID-19 seems to have affected relationships between community members and their leaders. Prior to the pandemic, community leaders enjoyed considerable respect from their community members who would listen to them more than agencies. However, the partner observed that there may have been some changes in the behavior of the community members towards their leaders since the pandemic. As an example, when leaders try to implement curfews in the community, some community members do not always follow and respond that it is only the police who can enforce such measures.

In Kampala, there have not been reports of major challenges of tensions within refugee communities. However, the cash assistance to urban refugees has created some tensions as refugees who are not knowledgeable with mobile money services were reportedly cheated by other refugees whom they requested to assist.

2. Early warning on signs of tensions in refugee communities

In the settlements in Arua, there was an increase in issues related to access to land between the host and refugee communities that could not be addressed adequately due to COVID-19 restrictions. Host community members have demanded to be supported with food rations like refugees as a token of appreciation for having given their land to refugees. While meetings were held with OPM to address the issue, refugees have reported frustration when trying to lease farming land as the demands of the host community could not be met.

Two warning signs were observed in the context of Adjumani. Firstly, tensions over land for farming or grazing cattle is growing, as refugees seek more land for cultivation to compensate for the reduction in food rations, which the host community is not willing to give without tangible benefits (e.g. rental fees for land, share in crops). Post rental conflict is also common, when landlords and their relatives challenge the terms of the agreement or attempt to move the refugees to a different piece of land. Secondly, there are reports of a growing number of refugees grazing cattle in host community farms surrounding Nyumanzi and Ayilo settlements. The conflicts in Nyumanzi over the past few years were clearly linked to this issue, and similar sentiments and signs are currently being observed in Nyumanzi and Ayilo.

With the reduction in food rations as well as in livelihood opportunities due to COVID-19 restrictions, refugees are reported as becoming desperate as they are increasingly unable to fend for their families. The desperation and frustration lead to arguments / conflicts, and further reductions in food rations could exacerbate the situation. Circulation of inaccurate information, for example rumours associated with access to food, NFIs and other resources, may result in perceived discrimination and denial of access to shared community resources, and worsen the situation.

Ongoing tensions among communities, especially after communal conflicts, have led to violent revenge attacks in some locations during the lockdown period. For instance, a number of intra-ethnic conflicts between Dinka subtribes and Nuer sub-clans as a result of a love triangle erupted in Rhino Camp and Kiryandongo. Inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflict arising from witchcraft allegations has also been reported. Arrests were made

and the community was sensitized about adherence to Ugandan laws and the need for peaceful coexistence and reporting disturbances to local leaders, police and OPM.

In Bidibidi, there is brewing discontent within the community who consider the placement of “new arrivals” in quarantine as a form of imprisonment. Increased alcohol consumption, leading to domestic violence, is also a concern. The number of women brewing alcohol has increased following restriction of movement that do not allow them to conduct other businesses as source of livelihoods.

Some members from the host community feel insecure due to the porous borders and South Sudanese still crossing the borders to enter Uganda, coupled with the fact the number of COVID-19 cases in South Sudan are rapidly increasing. Some leaders in Bidibidi have been blamed by the community members for reporting cases of visitors who have joined their families from South Sudan, and families are not comfortable when the visitors are taken for quarantine. Growing tension between refugees whose crops have been destroyed and the owners of animals from the host community was also reported.

In Kampala, it was reported that Local Council (LC) 1 of some villages have started to expel refugees from their villages.

3. Addressing tensions and conflicts in the context COVID-19 measures

Community leaders and other key community influencers have been playing important roles to address tensions and incidents of conflict within their respective communities, raise awareness, and pursue community-based solutions, while referring issues that require escalation to OPM, local authorities, police, UNHCR and partners for support and interventions. Meetings with a limited number of people are convened when required to address conflicts that have erupted. Conflicts involving the host community are mainly addressed through OPM and local leaders, although they may not be effective if the concerned parties are not able to meet and discuss contentious issues directly.

With respect to conflicts over land in Adjumani, the RWCs and LCs are working closely to mediate and resolve conflicts, supported by OPM and UNHCR.

In Bidibidi, curfew rules have been followed up and implemented by the Neighbourhood Watch Teams in close coordination with the police. RWCs report all new arrivals within the community to the COVID-19 taskforce.

To address some of the issues raised above, awareness-raising and sensitization of the community on key issues are ongoing for communication of accurate information and promotion of social cohesion and positive household relations, using diverse channels such as megaphones, radio, public address systems, door-to-door visits, etc.

However, with COVID-19 measures in place, certain steps to address underlying / structural issues to address resolve conflicts cannot be implemented (e.g. planned mapping of root causes of conflict in Adjumani which will lead to the development of a peace-building strategy), and it will need to be seen when this can be implemented.

In Kampala, LCs and police have been supportive in resolving conflicts that have erupted, and legal assistance is provided by partners to refugees in need of this support.

4. Recommendations from the community and agencies to address and prevent conflicts in the context of COVID-19

Recommendations from the community and agencies on measures to prevent and mitigate risk of conflict include the following:

- Empowerment of community leadership and self-management structures
- Inclusion of host communities in the COVID-19 response (e.g. awareness campaigns, distribution of soap and other hygiene items) considering that the virus poses risks for all
- Ensuring that accurate information on COVID-19 and related measures reaches the refugee and host communities to avoid misinformation which can cause fear, mistrust and misunderstandings
- Engage / involve refugee leaders in actions and decision-making on issues pertaining to their communities, and address their grievances.
- Continuous sensitization of communities on key issues impacting peaceful co-existence, including development of pre-recorded messages for dissemination through public address systems (e.g. Boda Boda Talk Talk), radio broadcasts and talk shows.
- Allowing limited meetings with relevant stakeholders (community leaders and elders, RWCs, OPM, host community authorities, UNHCR, partners), in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines, to enable community representatives to discuss contentious issues in a timely manner before they escalate into violent conflicts.
- Look into availability of more land for farming and grazing as a way to resolve conflict over land (recommendation from community in Adjumani)
- Regular community policing sessions in areas considered as hotspots
- Increased awareness-raising in community on the necessity to observe Ugandan laws and regulations and importance of peaceful co-existence among communities
- Repair dysfunctional water sources to avoid pressure on the few that are functional, as struggle for water prompts fights at water sources (recommendation raised in Kyangwali)
- Support refugees who are trapped in Kampala to return to their respective settlements
- Coordinated efforts to support re-integration of people who have recovered from COVID-19 back into their communities
- Enhance mechanisms for coordination on peace-building at local level
- Support to address underlying issues that can trigger more conflicts, such as livelihoods interventions to address economic vulnerability particularly given reduced food rations, support for alternative energy sources, etc. A related request from recently settled refugees in Kyangwali is to receive food in kind instead of cash given the hike in food prices with COVID-19.
- Inclusion of gender, peaceful co-existence, and child protection in the COVID-19 response planning and design.
- Agencies to move beyond immediate COVID-19 relief and start looking into long-term sustainable measures like livelihoods and self-sustainability of households and individuals after COVID-19.