**Uganda’s refugee policy and the enhancement of national security: a case of Pagirinya refugee settlement, Adjumani District**

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**Abstract**

*This research paper is a culmination of a study that sought to analyse the relationship between Uganda’s liberal refugee policy the country’s national security. The study aimed to achieve the following specific objectives: to examine the policy-related factors accounting for refugee influx into Uganda, to examine the relationship between freedoms and privileges granted to refugees affect and national security, and to examine the strategies put in place to mitigate national insecurities caused by refugee influx.*

*Using a mixed methods research approach, the study found out that the major attraction for refugees and asylum seekers into Uganda is the fact that Uganda is widely considered as an accommodating nation and its close proximity to a lot of conflict prone nations.*

*Refugees in Uganda were found to be mostly running away from war, famine and communal or inter-communal conflicts. Secondly, the findings showed a relationship between freedoms and privileges granted to refugees and national security in Uganda.*

*Finally, the study identified some strategies put in place by the government of Uganda and their effectiveness in addressing refugee related national security issues. These strategies include, awareness campaigns, incentives to host communities, expedition of asylum application and educating asylum seekers about the norms, cultures and laws of the host country.*

Keywords: refugee influx, refugee policy, national security

**Introduction**

Uganda implements an open-door, liberal refugee policy that has attracted an estimated 1.4 million refugees (UNHCR, 2017; OPM, 2017) into the country. This, magnanimity, however, poses security and other challenges, as Loescher (1992, p. 34-51) cited in Nabuguzi (1993) observed: “refugee problems are intensely political and their causes and consequences are intimately linked to political issues and national security”.

Nonetheless, Uganda is cognisant of the possible security challenges associated with hosting refugees, and has put in place laws and regulations—including the refugee Act—to ensure that refugees do not engage in behaviour that may endanger the security of its citizens or hurt its national security (Mujuzi, 2008). Therefore, it would be sound that reason that Uganda’s refugee policy offers hospitality to non-nationals in distress without compromising its national security.

Unfortunately, there has been evidence that in refugee communities there have been increased incidents of nefarious issues including burglary and violent assault perpetrated by both refugees and members of the host community which continue to threaten national security (Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group, CSBAG, 2018). Asha’s (2021) study revealed that refugees in uganda posed security threats that stemmed from the refugees’ urge to find means of survival including arable land, and the competition for the shared natural resources. Khadka (2017) had earlier observed that refugees in settlements in Uganda caused conflicts over natural resources (especially water and timber), and staged sporadic small-scale protests. Herbert and Idris (2018) reported heightened tensions between refugees and host communities arising from poverty and vulnerability of both groups, together with increased competition over resources, basic services, land and livelihoods.

The literature and previous research findings point to the fact refugees in Uganda cause tension and conflict that could have a national security dimension if they are not addressed. Yet, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there had been no study that had examined how Uganda’s liberal refugee policy could impact its national security. To bridge the knowledge gap, the current study was carried out to assess how Uganda’s refugee policy impacts national security in terms of how well it protects legal residents and citizens of Uganda without infringing on the rights of refugees seeking asylum in Uganda. Therefore, the study aimed at investigating how Uganda’s progressive refugee policy impacts national security in the country.

**Methods and materials**

This study made use of a mixed method research approach. Given that one research objective required the establishment of a relationship between variables, while others neither required the establishment of relationships nor quantification—no single approach was sufficient for this study; hence the choice to use a blend of the qualitative and quantitative methods.

The study was based on a case study research design which was considered relevant to address the research problem.

The study was conducted at Pagirinya refugee settlement located in Eastern Adjumani District, Northern Uganda. It is the latest refugee settlement and was launched in June 2016 after Maaji refugee settlement reached capacity. The settlement hosts more than 32,000 refugees from South Sudan (UNHCR, 2018).

The study population therefore included the entire refugee population in Pagirinya as well as the population of the community members in Eastern Adjumani which includes Adjumani local government officials and members of religious community, teachers and health providers, UNHCR officials working on health and legal issues, local council officials, girls, women and other members of the host community and refugees at Pagirinya.

At the time of the study, Pagirinya refugee settlement hosted an estimated 32,000 refugees (UNHCR, 2018) and a community population of about 234,000 (UBOS, 2014). Accordingly, the target population was 266,000. The study used a sample size of 397 respondents drawn from the Office of the Prime Minister, Sub-County officials, UNHCR officials, and adult refugees.

The study employed two sampling techniques of selecting the respondents. These were purposive and systematic random sampling techniques. The purposive sampling was used to select OPM Officials, Sub County officials, LCI officials and UNHCR Officials. The researcher also used the systematic random sampling technique to select adult refugees’, most especially household heads.

The study used the survey method, interview method, Focus Group Discussions, and the document review method to collect data, as well as self-administered questionnaires, an interview guide, a Focus Group Discussions Guide, and a Document review checklist, as data collection tools.

Qualitative data analysis involved content analysis of results from all the data collection tools that is the interview guide, Focus Group Discussions and the document check list. Qualitative data were interpreted by formulating explanation or description from the information collected where information of the same category was put together to form themes and sub themes for report writing. Qualitative data were further analysed using explanation or description from the information and they were illustrated by verbal quotation directly from the key respondents.

As for quantitative data, after the date collection, all questionnaires were cross checked to ensure that all questions are answered and questionnaires completed. The editing and coding of the questions were done before entering them into computer using Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 20) to develop tables with frequencies and percentages.

Empirical data were analysed according to the study objectives using descriptive statistics where frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations were presented in tables and interpreted and inferential statistics were analysed using Pearson correlation and regression.

Data validity was ensured through the use of the Content Validity Index (CVI). After pre-testing of the questionnaire at another refugee settlement not Pagirinya, it was checked for item consistence using Cronbach Alpha test to get a proportion of relevant questions.

Reliability was ensured through conducting a pre-test at another refugee settlement apart from Pagirinya so as to detect any major errors that would render the tools not effective. After the pre-testing of the research tool, the researcher used Cronbach (2004) co-efficient Alpha (internal consistence) to test for reliability.

**Results**

The study targeted a sample size of 397 respondents. Out of them 385 responded, yielding a response rate of 97% as represented in Table 4.1. Out of the 385, 50 participated in Focus Group Discussions, 13 were key informants, and 322 filled questionnaires.

Table 4.1: Response Rate

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Method | Response | Response rate |
| Questionnaire | 322 | 81.1% |
| FGDs | 50 | 12.6% |
| Interview | 13 | 3.3% |
| Totals | 385 | 97.0% |

The respondents were distributed by gender, age, marital status, education level, and country of origin. In the gender distribution, there were more males accounting for 57.4 % than females who accounted for 42.6%. By age, the majority of respondents were between the ages of 18-25 years (45.5%). This was followed by a draw in the age bracket of 26-35 years, and above 45 years (20.3%) and then age of 36-45 years (14.0%). By marital status, 62.6 % identified themselves as married, 35.1% as single, and 2.3% as divorced or separated. By the level of education, 27% had a secondary school education, 24.4% were diploma holders, 14.3% had a bachelor’s degree, 13.2% had a certificate, 10.6% had primary school education, 7.0% had a master’s degree, and 2.9% had a doctorate. Last but not least, out of a sample of 385 refugees, 52.5% were from South Sudan, 25.7% were from Somalia, and 15.3% were from the DRC.

**Factors accounting for refugee influx into Uganda**

The rationale behind this objective was the fact that in a lot of cases, refugees migrated to Western nations mostly because of the economic opportunities such migration will afford them, however considering the fact that Uganda is considered a low-income country, this does not appear to be the reason for the choice of destination for refugees. The researcher sought to understand the factors that forced people out of their countries as refugees, as well as those factors that attracted them to their destination country, in this case, Uganda.

It was found out that the major factor attracting refugees into Uganda is the fact that Uganda does not discriminate against refugees (M=3.46) and also the fact that refugee has an open arm policy to asylum seekers (M=3.41).

Various reasons were given, but they all could be categorised into three broad categories, namely, Economic, security and religious. Of the 385 respondents, 275 (71.4%) stated that security reasons were the main reason for fleeing their countries. They mostly explained that the ongoing crisis in their respective countries were the main reason why they had to flee their countries. Other factors stated in the responses, included, religious persecutive and economic reasons. Some respondents explained that due to the ongoing conflict in their countries, the economic situation had become unbearable, forcing them to seek better economic opportunities in Uganda.

### The relationship between freedoms and privileges granted to refugees and national security in Uganda.

Concerning the relationship or correlation between privileges and freedoms afforded to refugees in Uganda and national security, result from Pearson correlation analysis between the two variables shows that there is a significant positive relationship between the privileges afforded to refugees in Uganda and the issues pertaining to national security [r (400) = .490, p< .01]. The positive relationship implies that the more refugees are admitted into a particular area, the more likely original residents of those areas begin to feel threatened and are also likely to notice issues that can categorised as national security issues such as economic sabotage, increase in crime rate and an increase in communal clashes.

Interviews conducted with key stakeholders representing civil society organisations, sub-county officials and LCI officials in the community, all point to the fact that there is a growing distrust of migrants in this community due to an increase in crime, and other social deviancy that residents attribute to the foreigner. These informants agree that there is an increase in the ‘other’ narrative, where residents view these asylum seekers as competitors competing for very little and limited economic and social opportunities. These sentiments, as explained by some interviewees, can lead to more issues and even a complete breakdown of law and other if an intentional action is not taken to directly change the rhetoric of public officials and community members against the refugees.

However, the responses gotten from the OPM, and UNHCR officials were distinctly different from those gotten from the sub-county and LCI officials. The OPM and UNHCR officials interviewed all generally agreed that while there is an increase negative perception about refugees in the region, especially has it had to do with crime and economic sabotage, the reality on ground is different. The humanitarian representatives went on to suggest that care must be taken to reduce the negative rhetoric being peddled against refugees as a majority of the refugees are peaceful and are only seeking safe haven from the catastrophe that has befallen their home nations. The LCI and sub-county officials on the other hand are mostly of the opinion that the refugees are given too much freedom which leads to even stiffer competition for very scarce resources. As elected and government officials, they explain that it is their duty to, first and foremost, address the needs of the people before the needs of others.

**The mechanisms/strategies put in place to mitigate national insecurities caused by refugee influx**

the respondents have mixed feelings about the efficacy of government strategies and interventions on mitigating the negative effects of refugee influx. On the issue of security, the respondents mostly agree that the interventions and strategies by the government of Uganda has been effective in addressing the security issues in refugee saturated regions in Uganda. There was also unanimous agreement that the refugee act of 2006 and other policies by the government of Uganda has fostered peaceful coexistence between the refugees and their host communities.

The respondents were torn in the middle when it comes to the issues of crime in host communities caused by refugees. Majority of the respondents (44.5%) at least agree with the assertion that the government’s interventions have been effective in reducing crime in communities hosting large numbers of refugees. However, 39.8% at least disagreed with this assertion. Based on the fact that the difference in the percentages of those that agree and those that disagree is not significant, the researcher cannot categorically state that the strategies have been effective in curbing the crime rate, based on the statistics.

Findings also show that respondents are of the opinion that the government’s strategies have been effective in reducing xenophobic, religious and racial intolerance in the country (M=3.72). Finally, it is also clear that there is general agreement that the efforts by the government have not been effective in improving the economic opportunities for the host communities (M=2.57).

To find out what these interventions were exactly, the researcher asked government officials in the region to explain what the government of Uganda has done to mitigate the negative effects (as regards to national security) of refugee influx into the country.

**Discussion of Findings**

The findings showed that the major attraction to Uganda for refugees from neighbouring countries is the fact that Uganda is widely considered as an accommodating country that does not discriminate against refugees. Also, the proximity of Uganda to these countries is also an important factor in deciding where to relocate to for asylum seekers. Other respondents suggested that Uganda is peaceful and since they are running away from war and conflict, any country that guarantees some level of peace is attractive to them and they are predisposed to venturing ton such a country. The finding support those by IOM (2016) who explained that Uganda is an attractive destination for asylum seekers from East Africa, due largely to its strategic location and its accommodating policies.

On the factors that forces people to seek refuge in other countries, the respondents suggested that they are mostly running away from things beyond their country, such as war, famine and communal or inter-communal conflicts. This is also supported by studies carried out by World bank (2013), Kassem, Dupin and Hartz (2015) and UNHCR (2015) who all surmised that the major reason forcing people out of their ancestral lands and countries is civil war and conflicts.

Other factors that might lead to mass exodus of people from one country to another includes, political, social and economic factors. Among the respondents that completed the questionnaire, a lot of them explained that they are leaving the country due to economic hardship brought about by prolonged wars and conflicts in the country. Very few stated that they were escaping political persecution. This finding supports those by Owade, Awobamise and Jarrar (2019) and IOM (2016) that suggested that economic hardship and political persecution brought about by extended conflicts can lead to large displacement of people and migration.

### Relationship between freedoms and privileges granted to refugees and national security in Uganda.

Result from Pearson correlation analysis between the two variables shows that there is a significant positive relationship between the privileges afforded to refugees in Uganda and the issues pertaining to national security. The positive relationship implies that the more refugees are admitted into a particular area, the more likely original residents of those areas begin to feel threatened and are also likely to notice issues that can categorised as national security issues such as economic sabotage, increase in crime rate and an increase in communal clashes. It can therefore be concluded, that there is indeed a relationship between the freedoms afforded refugees in Uganda – such as right to own land, start a business and even get a job- and an increase in national security issues such as increased crime rate, increased competition that negatively impacts the original residents of the communities these refugees settle most in.

The findings of supports those by Scheinman (1983), and Cuenod (1993). Recently, Patricia Daley, (1993) who alluded to the fact that when the economic conditions are not optimal in the receiving communities, there is bound to be conflict when refugees are included in the mix. A study by Patrician Daley (1993) who found out that Tanzania’s decision to include a lot refugees in western Tanzania without addressing the availability of land and other amenities led to a situation where people (migrants inclusive) were competing for very scarce resources which in turn led to great conflict within the host communities. The consensus is that when there is economic instability, the national security is also threatened.

**To examine the strategies put in place to mitigate national insecurities caused by refugee influx**

Based on the responses gotten from the interview, the following is a summary of some of the strategies and interventions by the government of Uganda aimed at addressing the negative effects of refugee influx on host communities and national security;

Firstly, it was agreed that there is now Increased police and security presence in refugee camps and host communities, which has led to a significant reduction in crime. Similarly, the government of Uganda, has developed a mechanism to help better communicate with the community members and carry them along with the purpose of fostering better understand about the humanitarian need to accept refugees and also the economic benefits. It was the opinion of different stakeholders that due to better communication; the anti-refugee rhetoric and sentiment is much reduced. This supports the Securitization theory by Mcdonald (2008). which mainly asserts that speech acts can threaten the survival if not properly done. By changing the narrative and talking points in the communities, it has fosters peaceful coexistence between the host communities and the refugees. A mechanism for the host community to report any case concerning a refugee or asylum seeker in their community. Other strategies put in place has stated by the key stakeholders include the following

1. Increased awareness campaign about the economic benefit of accepting refugees into the country
2. Increased awareness about the humanitarian need to help their neighbours
3. Incentives to the host communities in form of land for farming, access to government loans for specific businesses and economic activities
4. Mechanism to expedite the asylum application process to ensure that asylum seekers know their fate quickly and can therefore start making long term plans and contributing more effectively in their host communities.
5. Educating asylum seekers about the norms, cultures and laws of the land, so there are no conflicts.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendation are made based on the results from the study.

There is a need for proper documentations about the needs and the reasons for fleeing their home countries. The findings of this study showed that the vast majority claimed that they were escaping persecuting and war in their countries, but there is no way to confirm or refute these claims. The researcher therefore recommends that a panel be set up to look at each asylum case on its individual remit, in order to ensure that only genuine cases are allowed into the country. It will be counterintuitive to allow criminal elements and warlords into one’s country all in the name of humanitarian aid.

It is also recommended that the economic and social needs to the host communities must be taken into consideration when making plans for refugee settlement in their communities. This study has shown that the major problems host communities have with refugees is the fact that there is increased competition for very scarce resources including land and employment opportunities. To address these misgivings, it is imperative that the government economically empowers the host communities, so they are no longer reluctant to help and assist the refugees.

Finally, the researcher recommends that the government steps up its communication mechanism. Efforts have been made to improve the communication mechanism that helps in informing the communities about government s efforts regarding refugee settlement. Despite these efforts, there is need to improve it. Grassroot participation should also be encouraged and there is also the need to improve the security apparatus within this host communities to better protect lives and properties to deter criminal elements from committing crimes.

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