

Current Status and Challenges of Refugee Policy in Uganda: Comparative Perspective on the Refugee–Host Relationship

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Abstract

As of 2021, Uganda hosts more than 1.5 million refugees from neighbouring countries, making it the largest refugee-hosting country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Uganda's refugee acceptance is characterised as 'generous' and 'progressive' by touting an open-door policy. However, refugee assistance has also brought inequality to the host communities in the region, as previous research pointed out. This article aims to analyse the current status and challenges of refugee policy in Uganda, focusing on the social relationship between refugees and their hosts. The first section overviews how the global adoption of an open-door policy towards refugees grew in the 2010s and why some countries abandoned/maintained it. In the next section, the history of refugee studies and refugee protection systems is examined, followed by the description of three case studies based on empirical data obtained from fieldwork that the author intermittently conducted in the West Nile sub-region, northwest Uganda, from 2014 to 2018. This last analysis indicates that diverse relationships have been established between refugees and their host community, which is very heterogeneous because of the region's historical and social background. In conclusion, it is pointed out that such diverse individual/social relations between refugees and hosts play a crucial role in bringing evaluation to Uganda as a successful model case even facing administrative challenges in Uganda.

Keywords: Open-door policy, border control, cross-border mobility, development, West Nile

1. Introduction

1.1 Open-door Policy towards Refugees in African refugee context

The number of refugees and asylum seekers is still growing. As of 2021, 82.4 million people have been forced to leave their homeland, including 20 million refugees and 48 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR 2021a). As refugee protection continues to be an urgent issue on the agenda in many regions, 'open-door' policies have been introduced in many countries. This policy,

in particular, drew attention as the number of refugees evacuated to Europe from Syria, where a severe civil war broke out, continued to increase after 2011 and was successively adopted not only by neighbouring countries such as Turkey also by Germany and other European Union (EU) countries.

While several countries have adopted/are adopting the open-door policy, this paper focuses on Uganda. Although the open-door policy aims to enhance refugee protection, it holds contradictory problems and limitations in Turkey (Al Jazeera 2015; Toğral Koca 2016). Similarly, even though an open-door policy was also implemented in 2015 in Germany, the policy was modified after a few years due to obstacles in internal affairs (e.g. Futák-Campbell and Pütz 2022; Pinkerton 2019). In contrast, Uganda is one of the countries that hold an open-door policy as a 'successful' case demonstrating that refugees and their host population can co-exist within a region.

This article examines the factors that contributed to the success of Uganda's refugee policy, including the open-door policy. As Hovil (2018: 3) points out, "with so few success stories in global displacement, there has been a tendency to idealise Uganda's refugee response." This paper argues that the 'success' of Uganda's refugee response is partly due to the realization of coexistence between refugees and hosts based on diverse social relationships that can not be dichotomized. It has been highlighted that relationships between refugees and host populations have been essential in refugee aid and refugee studies since the 1980s.

While the humanitarian response to protect refugees expanded acceptance, residents concerned about the growing refugee population showed dissatisfaction with the policy by holding protest demonstrations throughout the cities. This adverse situation developed to the extent that it divided public opinion in the host countries, and the refugee crisis became a more serious issue. For instance, Germany and Sweden, which had initially adopted a tolerant acceptance system, gradually shifted to restrictions and consecutively closed their doors (BBC 2016; CNN 2017; Futák-Campbell and Pütz 2022).

Contrary to several EU countries that have recently implemented restrictions affecting the acceptance of new refugees newly coming refugees, Uganda and other African countries have announced a 'maintaining' an open-door policy since 2016 and afterward. Uganda announced in 2019 that it would maintain its open-door policy and continue to accept refugees (UNHCR 2019a). In the same year, Zambia in Southern Africa also proclaimed its maintaining open-door policy (UNHCR 2019b), followed by Kenya in 2020. Then in 2021, Somalia declared the implementation of an open-door policy (Voice of America 2021).

It should be noted here that the open-door policy may vary from country to country in different ways. The open-door policy was introduced in EU countries in the 2010s and then abandoned after

only a few years. It refers to the expansion of new admission quotas in addition to existing refugee admissions, mainly the expansion of the number of Syrian refugees admitted and the omission or simplification of the refugee registration process. However, due to this expansion, cracks appeared in the refugee-hosting society, leading to the emergence of feelings of exclusionism and discrimination against the 'foreign/alien others' and minorities.

On the other hand, differences in its content and response can be recognised in the several African countries that adopted and maintained the open-door policy.¹ For example, in Somalia, it "allows them (refugees) to move freely and work, using their skills without the need of a permit" (Voice of America 2021). In Kenya, the border will be open "for new arrivals including from non-neighbouring countries such as Eritrea, Burundi, the Central African Republic and others" (UNHCR 2018: 5). As for Uganda, "all asylum seekers arriving from South Sudan and specific regions of eastern DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) who come through officially recognised entry points are granted *prima facie* refugee status" and "other nationalities seeking asylum are required to go through Individual Refugee Status Determination (RSD), conducted by the Refugee Eligibility Committee (REC)" (UNHCR 2019a). Uganda displayed a generous and progressive approach in accepting refugees and maintaining an open-door policy by keeping the conventional refugee reception without restricting their number.

This article includes empirical data from fieldwork conducted by the author from 2014 to 2018. In the next section, a background of refugee study and history of the refugee protection systems, in general, are explained in chronological order to examine Uganda's refugee policy. Among section two shows the history of refugee influx into and exodus from Uganda and positions her refugee policy within the global trend of refugee protection systems, section three explains the research method and the research sites. Finally, section four analyses three case studies of the West Nile sub-region, northwest Uganda.

1.2 Discourse of Refugee Study and Humanitarian Aid

The main focus of classic refugee studies is discussing the refugees' status. In response to the question 'who are refugees', the treatment of refugees as 'foreigners,' 'stateless persons,' and 'persons outside their country of nationality has been actively debated mainly in political science (Chimni 2009; Skran and Daughtry 2007). Because of the political, economic, and social impact of the refugee problem, the scope of social research moved to more diverse dimensions.

One of the factors highlighting the pluralistic aspects of refugee studies is the difficulty in distinguishing refugees from the (economic) migrants (Zolberg et al. 1989). Regarding the status of

¹ It is indicated as an "open-door asylum policy" in the script (UNHCR 2018: 5).

refugees as objects of protection, various conventions have emphasised the resilience and creativity of refugees to determine their means of livelihood voluntarily, and studies have shown that refugees use the ‘vulnerability’ of being refugees (Horst 2006; Zolberg et al. 1989). In the past, evictions caused by the establishment of national parks for nature conservation and tourism attraction, the construction of large-scale dams, and the implementation of urban resettlement plans were mainly treated in the field of development studies as problems related to ‘resettlement.’ However, there have been attempts to consider this as a problem of ‘forced/displacement’ and to understand it comprehensively together with refugee issues (e.g. Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982; Ohta 2005).

Refugee studies have developed concerning actual refugee assistance (Black 2001; Crisp 1986; Yamazaki 2016). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 in response to the refugee crisis that surfaced in Europe after World War II, with the primary mission of protecting refugees’ basic human rights. Currently, the UNHCR’s ‘persons of concern’ include refugees, IDPs, returnees, stateless persons, and asylum seekers.² Since the 1960s many refugees fled from Asia and Africa as a result of civil wars and political instability, and the ‘refugee problem’ was recognised as an urgent issue that needed to be addressed not only in Europe but worldwide. In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, the scope of UNHCR’s assistance was expanded to include IDPs. In the 2000s, the problem of ‘protracted situation’ became a concern, although the issue of repatriation had already been recognised in the 1980s (Crisp 1986; Harrell-Bond 1986).

In 2018, the Global Compact on Refugees was adopted, reaffirming the international commitment to solving the protracted refugee situation.³ The background to adopting this arrangement was that developed countries also sought to share the economic burden of hosting refugees, which is concentrated in developing countries. However, the traditional trend of refugees fleeing from one developing country to another as their country of origin and place of refuge has not changed significantly. A radical solution to this problem is still being sought.

In the 1980s, research institutions and university courses on refugees were established, and academic journals on refugee issues became increasingly published. In the 1980s, the establishment of these institutions, university courses, and journals led to the quantitative accumulation of research on refugees, and the field of ‘refugee studies’ has been developed (Black 2001: 58–60; Chatty and Marfleet 2013; Harrell-Bond 1998: 9–10; Malkki 1995). Nowadays, some scholars positively evaluate refugee studies as cross-disciplinary, while others assume that refugee studies are still conceptually

² UNHCR Global Focus. Available at <<https://reporting.unhcr.org/glossary>> (Last accessed on 7 October 2021).

³ The overall objective of the Global Compact is to 1) reduce the burden on refugee-host countries, 2) promote the self-reliance of refugees, 3) expand access to solutions in third countries, and 4) support the development of conditions in countries of origin for the safe and dignified return of refugees (United Nations 2018: 4).

and theoretically scattered (Chatty and Marfleet 2013).

2. Ugandan Refugee Policy

2.1 History of Refugee influx and exodus, and Refugee Policy of Uganda

Uganda has been receiving refugees since before its independence in 1962 when people were fleeing Rwanda-Burundi in the wake of the social revolution of 1959. In 1960 the Nakivale Refugee Settlement was established, and it represents one of the oldest refugees settlements still in use (Bjørkhaug 2020; Refugee Law Project [RLP] 2005). This section describes the history of Uganda's refugee in- and out-flow, its refugee policy's characteristics, and how it is positioned in international refugee assistance trends.

When the regime of President Idi Amin collapsed in 1979, people were displaced from West Nile; by the end of 1979, some 30,000 refugees had fled to southern Sudan and about 50,000 to Zaire. The repatriation campaign by the second Obote government in 1980 was unsuccessful, and the return of refugees did not proceed (Crisp 1986; Harrell-Bond 1986). Because of the increasingly violent looting and killings by rebel groups and the Ugandan government forces in West Nile, Ugandan refugees in southern Sudan had reached 130,000 by 1982 (Crisp 1986: 164). By 1984, about 240,000 to 260,000 people lived as refugees in southern Sudan and the DRC (Crisp 1986: 164).

The horrific violence in the Luwero Triangle ceased in the 1980s and led to large numbers of people returning, making family reunions extremely difficult (Kabera and Muyanja 1994). In the 1990s, anti-government rebel groups, such as the Lord's Resistance Army, became active in the northern part of the country, and the situation worsened. In the early 2000s, a peace agreement was signed between the rebels and the Museveni regime. People who had fled the country and taken refuge in the country gradually returned to their homeland. Concurrently, especially from the southern part of Sudan, where people experienced two major civil wars from the 1950s to the 1970s, and from the 1980s to 2005, there was a massive influx of refugees into Uganda. Refugees also escaped to Uganda from the DRC (then Zaire), where the civil war worsened in the 1990s. As the situation in Uganda became more stabilized, many refugees entered there, with the highest number of refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa as of 2021 (UNHCR 2021b). Most refugees originated from South Sudan, and Uganda has also received refugees from Kenya, the DRC, Somalia, and other regions.

According to internal law, policy, and regulations, competent authorities for refugee-related matters so that refugee policy vary from country to country. In Uganda, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) is mandated by Article 108A of the constitution and, through the Department of Refugee under the Ministry of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, oversees refugee

matters (OPM 2021).⁴ Refugee Desk officers are dispatched to areas where refugee settlements are located. These officers provide forms of support in coordination with the local government. The OPM will send settlement commandants and other staff to ‘control’ the refugees in the settlements. Also, in the settlements, the UNHCR, its implementing and operation partner, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide services such as education and healthcare (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005: 39). The UNHCR and OPM are in charge of asylum applications during the refugee registration process, whereas the Refugee Eligibility Committee makes the final decision on refugees (Sugiki 2011: 138).

Uganda ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol in 1976, and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention in 1987 (Sharpe and Namusobya 2012: 563; Verdirame and Harell-Bond 2005: 36). The Control of Alien Refugees Act (CARA) was enacted in 1964, shortly after Uganda gained independence in 1962, and was replaced by the Refugees Act in 2006 as the national law on refugee management (RLP 2003; Sharpe and Namusobya 2012). Uganda has declared many policies that enhance or empower refugees’ sustainability, such as the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) launched in 1999 (Refugee Studies Centre 2019)⁵, the Income Generating Assistance Programme, Development Assistance for Refugees, and Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (Hovil 2018). In March 2017, “OPM officially launched the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), adapting the principles and objectives set out in Annex 1 of the New York Declaration of Refugees and Migrants to the Ugandan context. The CRRF is a multi-stakeholder coordination model on refugee matters focusing on humanitarian and development needs of both refugees and host communities” (OPM n.d).

As reported above, Uganda’s refugee response has continually reflected the international refugee protection systems and remarkably led to the introduction of global trends in refugee assistance, such as CRRF launched in 2017 in response to the New York Declaration of 2016. This is one of the factors that makes Uganda seen as a model case for refugee assistance.

⁴ The mandate of the OPM used to be stipulated in Article 189 of the 1995 Constitution. Office of the Prime Minister, Republic of Uganda. (2014) “Department of Refugees” <<http://opm.go.ug/departnebts/departments-of-disaster-preparedness-management-refugees/departments-of-refugees.html>> (Last accessed on Feb 2016). Since the constitution was amended in December 2017, Article 108 of the Constitution stipulates the OPM’s mandate.

⁵ Kaiser (2006: 603) explains the detailed background of the SRS launch in Uganda.

2.2 Multifold Relationship between Refugees and Their Host Population

This section reviews how previous studies have analysed the pluralistic relationship between refugees and their host community regarding refugee-host relationships. According to Chambers (1986), conventional studies on refugees have neglected the existence of host populations, host communities, and local people. Chambers noted that even when host societies were mentioned, it was only incidentally with most of the discussion focusing on refugees first and 'poorer host' / 'vulnerable host' ⁶ later (Chambers 1986: 246). He argued that the refugees that researchers/fieldworkers consider are generally poor, vulnerable, and powerless; additionally, they draw so much attention that researchers have little time or energy to consider and address the issue of refugees' impact on the local population (Chambers 1986: 246). Refugee studies to date have considered local populations as a monolithic group, even when they are recognised (Chambers 1986: 247, 256–257). It is necessary to clarify the specific households and individuals who are poverty-stricken, the entire region affected by refugees, and how they are positioned in social relations with other residents.

According to Chambers (1986), the impact of the arrival of refugees, especially in terms of 'food' and 'land, labour, and wages', depends mainly on whether there is enough land.⁷ First, residents' agricultural production exchange and the food aid distributed to refugees are highly affected. Indeed, when refugees arrive in large numbers, the area experiences food shortages, the price of agricultural products increases significantly, and surplus is sold for profit. This economic impact hinders the local people who cannot afford these price increases and must wait in long food distribution lines or barter with refugees. Second, the emergence of refugees as a source of cheap labour benefits locals who can afford to hire refugees as a large workforce for ploughing, weeding, and harvesting. However, for poor local people whose livelihoods depend almost entirely on wage labour, the loss of work to refugees who are hired at lower wages is a matter of life and death. In contrast, it is common for employers to delay the payment of wages to refugees, and the treatment is almost exploitative (Chambers 1986).

⁶ Chambers (1986) argues that the impact of the arrival of many refugees on host communities is not simple, and that poorer or vulnerable hosts are particularly disadvantaged, and attention should be paid to these people. The 'poorer host' is 'the relatively poorer local population compared to the rest of the population' (Chambers 1986: 245). He addresses 'food'; 'land, labour, and wages'; 'services'; 'common property resources'; and 'economic development' that local population was divided into three segments: (1) surplus farmers, (2) subsistence farmers, and (3) labourers with negligible or no land (Chambers 1986: 249). Although not explicitly stated, his term 'poorer local residents' probably refers to this third category. Regarding public service, see (Chambers 1986: 252–254). Chambers's (1986) assertion that the 'poorer communities' are the most affected by refugees seems to be especially true for food, (agricultural) labour and land. Concerning public services and common resources, it is not clear from the text how the difference in land area owned by local residents correlates with each of these items. However, it is not difficult to imagine that the arrival of refugees may further impoverish vulnerable local populations who may lose out to competition for resources and jobs.

⁷ This is based on prior case studies of refugees from Ethiopia in Eastern Sudan, from Liberia in Western Africa, Angolan refugees fleeing to Zambia and Zaire, and refugees from Mozambique in Eastern Zambia (Chambers 1986).

Chambers (1986) asserted that classic refugee studies have focused on poor and vulnerable refugees while neglecting the local people who host them. This created a stir in subsequent policy evaluations of refugee assistance, and the impact of refugees on local communities has been noted in reports and research papers by aid agencies.⁸ Thus, a growing body of research seeks to elucidate the relationship between refugees and the host population, considering both perspectives (Brun 2010; Callamard 1994; Codjoe et al. 2013; Ohta 2005). In addition to the analytical axis of differences in land area, those factors such as language, culture, social background, gender, occupation, and economic disparity have been explored to characterise the diversity of residents (Codjoe et al. 2013).

The environment surrounding refugees and local populations has changed dramatically in the last three decades. In the late 1980s, when Chambers' s article was published, there was a turning point in the refugee protection system, and comprehensive studies analysed the diversity of refugees through field research in and around refugee settlements (Chambers 1986: 248). This paper follows these previous studies but attempts a new analysis reflecting the situation in contemporary Uganda. The following sections explain the trajectory of refugee support and protection systems and refugee studies and point out how refugee-host relationships contribute to the management of Uganda' s open-door policy.

3. Research Methods and an Overview of the Research Site

Empirical data was collected during the fieldwork from 2014 to 2018 in the Nyumanzi, Imvepi⁹, Rhino Camp refugee settlements (Map. 1), and other settlements in the West Nile sub-region of northwest Uganda. I spent a few days to two weeks in each settlement to conduct interviews with refugees, the host population, NGO staff, and OPM staff. Unstructured interviews were mainly adopted, taking notes during interviews, and recording was kept to a minimum with interviewees' consents. Because the refugees originated from different communities in the DRC and South Sudan, interpreters of the refugees' local languages assisted the interviews when needed. To conduct research in the refugee settlements, I obtained a research permit from the Uganda National Council

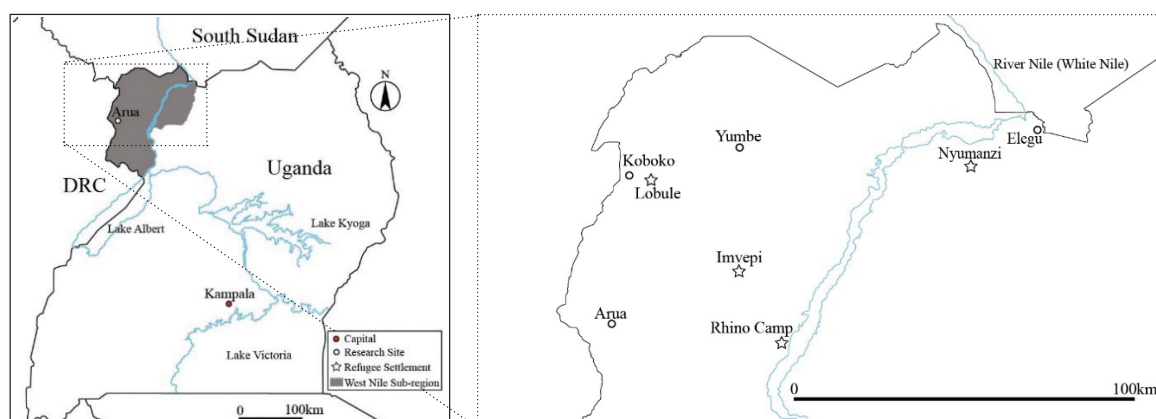
⁸ Even before Chambers's (1986) study focused on the relationship between refugees and residents from a development perspective, others considered the relationship between refugees and residents. For example, Hansen and Oliver-Smith (1982), in their study of forced displacement in sub-Saharan Africa and South America, looked at the relationships between refugees and local populations, not only in terms of armed conflicts and political uprisings but also in terms of forced evictions owing to dam development. In this paper, I have tried to clarify the relationship between refugees and residents within their respective groups and the relationship between groups (Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982).

⁹ Imvepi refugee settlement was initially established decades ago and closed in the 2000s. In 2017, the increase of refugee influx from South Sudan caused it (Interviewed in 2017 in West Nile with a resident who has been working with NGO for more than ten years).

for Science and Technology and a permission letter from the OPM.

Like in other parts of Africa, in West Nile, multiple ethnic groups live in different territories across territorial lines (later called borders). West Nile in Uganda has a history of its borders being redrawn with each change in sovereignty over the country, from Anglo-Egyptian Sudan to the Belgian Congo to the Uganda Protectorate (Leopold 2009). People have been crossing borders for their daily necessities regardless of their nationalities, which helps them seek asylum in the circumstances of instability. For instance, people fled to the neighbouring states when the situation in Uganda became unstable from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s (Harrell-Bond 1986). Due to security instability in southern Sudan, people moved back into Uganda in the late 1980s with an influx of Sudanese refugees into Uganda (Allen 1996). In the 1990s, when the anti-government movement grew, many refugees flowed out of Uganda into the DRC and southern Sudan.

The area of West Nile province during the colonial period was roughly equivalent to the current administrative unit of the West Nile sub-region. Today, there are 12 districts in West Nile, of which Arua is the region's political and economic core. This once underdeveloped region has undergone major changes in recent years. Since the government-led development policies of the 2010s, road infrastructure has been improved through urban development, an all-weather market has been constructed, and the construction of a sports stadium with commercial facilities is proceeding at a rapid pace. The main highway between West Nile and the capital, Kampala, is lined with petrol stations, hotels, and lodges. Community land is sold or leased in rapid succession. Land that could be purchased for shillings per hectare in 2012 had a higher value in 2020. Arua is the fourth most densely populated district in the country, with 780,000 people as of 2014 (UBOS 2014), and the population has been growing ever since. West Nile is home to diverse ethnic groups with different languages and comprises a segmentary society. The largest ethnic group is the Lugbara, followed by other ethnic groups including the Madi, Kakwa, Kebu, Alur, and Nubi, with all living in Arua, giving the town a cosmopolitan character (Leopold 2005).



Map 1. Refugee Settlements in the West Nile sub-region

In December 2013, a civil war broke out in the newly independent South Sudan, bringing large numbers of refugees into Uganda, and the number of South Sudanese refugees entering Uganda has grown since the conflict escalated in 2016. Of the more than 1.5 million refugees in Uganda, more than 900,000 are from South Sudan, and approximately 800,000 refugees are registered in West Nile, many of whom live in refugee settlements (UNHCR 2021b).

4. Case Study

4.1 Impact on the Relationship between Refugees and Their Hosts through Land and Road

Infrastructure

This section describes the process of land transfer for establishing refugee settlements in Uganda, based on interviews conducted in the field. In Uganda, the OPM and local government, in charge of refugee matters, hold briefings for residents. At these meetings, the officials inform the local people that they will benefit from establishing refugee settlements in exchange for the free provision of land. The benefits include the construction of highways and availability of labour.¹⁰ According to a resident from one of the locations where large refugee settlements are located, people from the OPM and NGOs visited their community in the 1990s and explained how residents would benefit from settlements' establishment.¹¹

Refugee settlements are often built in remote areas of the country where population density is low and transportation inaccessible. When settlements are established, usually in areas where there is enough land to be cleared for refugee settlements, the meaning and use of that land can affect how previous inhabitants relate to the incoming refugees. Refugees evacuated from South Sudan first stay at a place called a 'collecting point' in the town of Elegu, located at the border (Map. 1). A daily bus service connects the collecting point to the settlement once a day. The bus takes them to the Nyumanzi refugee settlement¹², where they register as refugees.¹³ At the collecting point, there is also an office (a single-story concrete building) for the police. Police officers are deployed to screen the arrivals and stop people who are for peddling.

After leaving Elegu and completing refugee registration procedures in Nyumanzi, refugees are provided three meals a day until they are transported again to their respective plots of residence.

¹⁰ Interviews with an OPM staff member and two NGO staff members in August 2014.

¹¹ Interview with a resident in November 2016.

¹² The Nyumanzi refugee settlement held the largest refugee population out of the 13 refugee settlements established in northwestern Uganda as of August 2014.

¹³ Interviews with UNHCR and NGO staff in August 2014 and refugee women in February 2018. The Refugee Law Project mentions a similar procedure (2005b: 9).

According to the number of ingredients and menus per person, the volunteers recruited from the staff of aid organisations cook and serve the meals. Some refugees who speak English and some Ugandans who speak the language of the refugees are often hired by NGOs as interpreters and are paid a daily stipend and provided with meals. This is a valuable opportunity to provide cash or in-kind services to refugee settlements where multilingualism is prevalent.

Logistics is critical because it allows large vehicles to pass through the area to deliver food and other relief goods, such as clothing, soap, sanitary products, stationery, and supply water to water tanks. In addition, in Uganda and other parts of Africa, the influx of refugees helps secure the workforce needed for agricultural work. In particular, the Koboko district in northwest Uganda is where rapid infrastructure development has progressed due to refugees' acceptance.¹⁴ In addition, the main road in the Yumbe district (Map. 1), which is located between the Moyo and Koboko districts where roads are complete, has been left unpaved for a long time. Finally, the road would be improved thanks to Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The construction of such roads will allow for the smooth implementation of aid activities for refugees and benefit the residents who have been constrained in various ways because of the inconvenience of transportation access.

4.2 Common Language among Refugees and Host Communities

Many people who have conducted refugee research in Uganda can immediately notice that many of the refugees, like a woman I met, had been to Uganda many times before living in the settlement as refugees. This is large because West Nile is home to a mixed population of ethnic groups who share linguistic and cultural backgrounds across the border into South Sudan and the DRC. The following are some examples of how the presence of people who speak the same language across the border affects the building of relationships between refugees and residents. This section focuses on interviews conducted in the Lobule refugee settlement in Koboko district, which shares a border with Uganda, Sudan, and the DRC.

According to a study conducted by the RLP in Koboko county in the mid-2000s, mutual understanding among the Kakwa people across the border between Uganda, southern Sudan, and the DRC was promoted with aided radio broadcasts. The programmes informed the people about current events, and traditional celebrations passed down from generation to generation and maintained good relations between the refugees and the local people (RLP 2005b: 15–16). However, Ugandans' perceptions of their relationship with refugees seem somewhat context-sensitive. In the

¹⁴ Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP): Support Programme to the Refugee Settlements and Host Communities in Northern Uganda (SPRS-NU). Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/horn-africa/uganda/regional-development-and-protection-programme-rdpp-support-programme_en> (Last accessed on 3 March 2022).

narrative of a refugee from southern Sudan interviewed for the study, it was noted that ‘in Koboko, the relationship between refugees and Ugandans is good, but in the neighbouring district of Yumbe, there is no interaction between refugees and Ugandans’ (RLP 2005b: 16). In 2005, another RLP research team surveyed Yumbe and Koboko and found that Ugandans viewed their relationship with refugees as strained, especially concerning security issues (RLP 2005b: 16).

As of 2014, when I researched the refugee settlement of Koboko, both refugees and local Ugandan residents commented positively on their relationship, which clearly reflects the depth of the relationship between the two. During the interview with Congolese refugees in Koboko, who communicated with Ugandan refugee support NGO staff in Kakwa, their first language. At a refugee settlement in the Koboko district, I spoke with a refugee woman, who was in her 60s and had been evacuated from the Kakwa community in the DRC.¹⁵ She said, ‘this is the first time to reach Uganda as a refugee.’ ‘Have you ever been to Uganda before?’ I asked, and she replied, ‘Yes, many times. I know Uganda very well. Nevertheless, this is the first time I live in a settlement as a refugee.’ Failing to ask her any more questions, such as what had brought her to Uganda before, or why she lived in the settlement ‘this time,’ I had to leave the settlement with the NGO that had lent us a vehicle. Even after we departed each other, I kept remembering her words. The reason for this was that I had heard many times that an FM radio station was broadcasting in West Nile and has produced a programme titled ‘Refugees and Host Communities,’ in which they talked about how ‘many of the South Sudanese refugees who came to Uganda after December 2013 were coming to Uganda for the first time’, and how ‘we,’ the host community of West Nile, were once refugees. An example of the programme listings of radio stations operating in West Nile since 2014 revealed that many stations use multiple languages. Some programmes are broadcast with simultaneous interpretation for refugees (Table 1).¹⁶ NGOs and the OPM sponsored these radio programmes to promote their projects of refugees and the host population.

¹⁵ August 2014 at the Lobule refugee settlement in the Koboko district.

¹⁶ In addition to the three main stations listed in Table 1, 13 FM radio stations were broadcasting programmes in West Nile (e.g., Adjumani, Moyo, Koboko, Nebbi, and Zombo districts) as of the survey in 2018, and all of them were broadcasting in at least two languages: one of the local languages and English.

Table 1. Radio stations in West Nile and multiple local languages spoken in the programmes

FM radio station in West Nile (Mhz)	Location of the studio	Languages used in programmes	Notes
Arua One (88.7)	Awindiri, Arua District	Lugbara, English, Swahili, Alur, Nubi, Kakwa, Madi, and Lingala	Founded by a local resident from West Nile. It is now under government sponsored media group.
Voice of Life (100.9)	Arua Hill, Arua District	Lugbara, English, Swahili, and Alur	Founded by the Anglican Church.
Radio Pacis (90.9/94.5)	Ediofe, Arua District	Lugbara, English, Swahili, Alur, Kakwa, Nubi, and many other local languages	Founded by Catholic missionaries. They have many branches in districts across Uganda.

Source: compiled by the author (2018 field data)

4.3 Reduction of Aid Supports and Seeking for Means of Livelihood Owing to the Prolonged Refugee Situation

The UNHCR regards refugees who stay for five years and more as protracted. The type of support provided to protracted refugees varies from country to country. First, immigration and refugee policies and management are at the discretion of the national laws of each country and region. Second, the financial situation is also a factor. Further, the ease with which international organisations can operate in each country has an indirect impact. For these reasons, priority is given to ‘new’ refugees who urgently need assistance. In contrast, assistance to refugees who have been in the country of asylum for a long time may be discontinued.

Host countries and aid organisations – which bear the financial and human burdens of collecting goods – are expected to support refugees so that they can break free from the state of remaining on aid and earn a living on their own. For example, when I visited refugee settlements in Uganda, South Sudanese refugees who arrived after December 2013 were referred to as ‘new refugees’ by aid agency staff, while refugees who had come from the DRC since the end of 1990 were referred to as ‘old refugees.’ Food and daily necessities were distributed to the ‘new refugees’ on a priority basis, whereas the budget allocated to the ‘old refugees’ was limited. On the other hand, when I interviewed the ‘old refugees’ living in Uganda for more than ten years, some of the refugees complained that the rations for those who could feed themselves were gradually reduced. They had

received almost no support as of August 2014.¹⁷ Although many refugees in the settlement received small-scale land to grow vegetables and beans, the decrease in relief is a matter of life and death for them with an unsatisfactory standard of living (see also Hovil 2007).

Although aid support for ‘old refugees’ has been reduced under a prolonged situation, there are alternative job opportunities for them to survive; for instance, some refugees who can work with host populations can earn a small amount of money. Refugees help host communities in agricultural work in most cases, and those day labours are called *leja leja* (cf. Allen 1996: 247).¹⁸ In many countries, however, refugees are not allowed to fully engage in economic activities in the host country, limiting cash-earning opportunities for them. Even in areas where refugees are granted economic opportunities, such as Uganda, refugees often cannot continue with the same means of livelihood they had prior to displacement. Hence, remittances are a vital element to sustain their daily necessities as some refugees use mobile money transfer services to receive money from South Sudan.¹⁹

Receiving many refugees can also contribute to creating jobs for residents, and they can be hired as volunteers or engineers at NGOs, the OPM, and other refugee-related institutions. There are also cases of poor hosts performing labour for refugees and receiving compensation by giving land to refugee settlements (cf. Bjørkhaug 2020). Therefore, from the perspective of residents who have access to such opportunities to obtain jobs in refugee aid, it is often beneficial to receive refugees in their community.

5. Conclusion

This article examines the current status and challenges of the refugee policy in Uganda, focusing on the relationship between refugees and the host population. Specifically, it focuses on the social

¹⁷ Interview with Congolese refugees in Lobule refugee settlement in 2014. By 2020, refugees in the Lobule refugee settlement were all ‘old refugees’ from the DRC. ‘New refugees’ are dispatched in Imvepi, Rhino Camp, and many other settlements in Uganda. In the mid-2000s, few refugees in Imvepi and Rhino Camp settlements received complete food ration; “in Imvepi, ‘old caseload’ refugees who arrived before 2001 receive a half while those arriving later still receive a full ration. In Rhino Camp, most people were in 2004 receiving 40% or 50% rations” (Kaiser 2006: 605–606).

¹⁸ The word *leja leja* can be seen in the report published in the mid-1950s during the colonial period. It means ‘one at a time’ refereeing to some sort of works that the porters engaged in “fixed tasks for which they are paid on completion” (Richards 1954: 120) and also to casual piece work for “pocket money even when migrants have established their own food supply” (Richards 1954: 152). Some residents also mention this word when they went for casual work during exile in the late 1970s to early 1980s (an interview with host population in Arua district in 2018).

¹⁹ Interviews with female South Sudanese refugees in the Imvepi refugee settlement, February 2018. For further information on overseas remittances using mobile money on mobile phones, see Horst (2006), who describes vividly how refugees use their trans-border networks of Somali refugees in Kenya to survive a difficult life.

relations between refugees and their host population who used to be refugees in West Nile, northwest Uganda. This report highlights that the refugee registration process, the countries and regions of origin of asylum seekers, and the rights granted to registered refugees in Africa are different from the open-door policy implemented in Europe in the mid-2010s.

In contrast to other countries in the EU that restricted the new inflow of refugees, the difficulties associated with introducing an open-door policy and increasing refugee numbers have been relatively small in Uganda. An increase in the refugee population has not led to anti-refugee sentiment in the West Nile and Ugandan society. Diverse social relations had already been formed between refugees and their host community, contributing to such possibilities.

While developed countries provide financial support to developing countries and bear the 'economic burden' according to those policy declarations, developing countries are actually and physically responsible for accepting refugees. Behind the declaration in Uganda and other African countries in the late 2010s to maintain an open-door policy was the agreement to share the burden incurred by refugee-hosting countries and permanently solve the refugee problem as for the 2016 New York Declaration and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. The open-door policy structure has not changed significantly, with refugee acceptance in developed countries being severely restricted, whereas it is concentrated in developing countries neighbouring conflict-affected areas.

The OPM declared that Uganda should 'maintain' its open-door policy towards refugees in 2019, and Uganda continues to receive many refugees from neighbouring countries. The open-door policy is primarily intended to contribute to the protection of refugees; however, Ugandans also benefit from the by-products of accepting more refugees. When I visited the base camp where aid workers stayed in 2018, it had been renovated, and a new visitor lodge had been built. In 2016, accommodation prices in the refugee settlements had jumped, causing inflation.

In February 2018, the number of registered refugees had been padded, and aid money had been misappropriated, which was widely reported as a 'refugee scandal' (Daily Monitor 2018; Institute for Security Studies 2019; Reuters 2018). Despite the institutional problems noted, the acceptance of refugees in Uganda has become a catalyst for development assistance, and this situation is expected to continue in the future. There is a new phase in which refugee assistance and local urban development accelerate in tandem. Apart from such support itself, the case studies in this paper show that refugees and their hosts had established diverse individual/social relationships. It has partly but crucially contributed to the 'success' of the open-door policy in northwest Uganda, where people shared their linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds before those refugee policies launched.

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