

HOW REFUGEES IN UGANDA ARE RE-BUILDING LIVELIHOODS AND FOOD SYSTEMS



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South Sudanese who have fled the fighting in Sudan find what shelter they can at a transit centre in the town of Renk, next to the border crossing point (source: Jok Solomun/Reuters, The New Humanitarian)

Introduction

This article looks at the links between forced displacement¹ – which occurs as a result of human rights violations, insecurity, conflict, climate change, among others – and food insecurity. It looks at how refugees (with a particular focus on adult learners in Common Interest Groups (CIGs) in the Kyaka II refugee settlement²) are reconstructing their food systems³, fighting hunger and preserving their food culture through adult learning and extension education support.

Context

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Global Trends Report (2022) indicates that by the end of 2022, 108.4 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced, almost 90% of them in low- and middle-income countries.

Low- and middle-income countries also play host to 76% of the world's refugees and other people in need of international protection. Despite

Uganda being one of the poorest and most food insecure countries in the world, and in a context of diminishing humanitarian aid and an increasing refugee population, it is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, with over a million refugees, most of whom are from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi and Somalia⁴.

Forced displacement is not a passing event – it often becomes a protracted displacement and can be devastating. People are forcefully uprooted from their lives and relocated to places and spaces, such as overcrowded settlements and camps, with limited or no opportunities to live a dignified life. Refugees face deprivation of life's essentials, in particular shelter and food, including the right to produce their own food. They experience marginalisation and extended suffering of 'indignities and material hardship' (Crawford, Cosgrave, Haysom and Walicki, 2015).

Some countries, like Uganda, have a 'progressive and favourable refugee policy'⁵ (Food Security Dashboard Quarter 2, 2023). However, even with

this focus on self-resilience, there are limited livelihood opportunities for refugees. As a result there are 'socio-economic vulnerabilities, protection risks, and limited access to basic essential services such as food, education, and healthcare' (ibid.).

Land access is seen as a significant determinant of food security and, therefore, access to agricultural land is available to refugees but on a limited scale. The rural host population in the same settlements have slightly more land for agriculture, compared to refugee households. Over the years there has been a reduction in soil fertility, increasing water scarcity and unpredictable weather, characterised by flooding in the rainy season and prolonged dry spells, all of which impact negatively on crop production. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded the food insecurity situation for many, especially for refugee households.

The role of food

Scholars, such as Awidi and Quan-Baffour (2020), note that similarities in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, religion, history, food, 'among other malleable identity constructs' (Ho, 2017) result in refugees feeling more 'at home' and foster a sense of oneness. These 'affinity ties' (ibid.) or connections play a role in helping refugees to integrate socially and economically with fewer difficulties.

'Food is intrinsically linked to culture, identity, and for people with lived refugee experiences, cultural foods are a critical part of settlement into a new country, which is often a time of high stress and dislocation from friends and family' (Gingell, Murray, Correa-Velez and Gallegos, 2022). It is not uncommon to see Congolese refugees, for example, swap the World Food Programme (WFP)' 5-litre jerrycan of processed oil for the Congo-based orange palm oil, a preferred oil for cooking.

Traditional food often gives displaced people a sense of 'hope and solace' and serves 'as a source of normalcy and stability' (Foodtank, 2016).

90% of refugees in the Kyaka II settlement depend on agriculture for food. Unfortunately land size and soil productivity is reducing every year.



Refugees in a local food market in a settlement in Uganda (source: UNHCR portal)



Preferred orange cooking oil



WFP distributed cooking oil

Therefore, refugees have adapted by producing food in backyard gardens. Agriculture extension education supports participants⁸ to use the small plots maximally (Awidi and Quan-Baffour, 2020). 'Caphas', a CIG participant, describes some of the practices they use to increase the chances of food production in these backyard plots and also explains how refugees often sell part of their produce to meet other needs:

[We use] bottle irrigation technology, organic pesticides, and compost manure [...].

[...] We rear and sell goats from which we buy land in instalments; we make compost manure for our garden from goat droppings [...].

The role of adult education

In Uganda, refugees are able to participate in adult learning programmes and these programmes, plus the lived experience of being a displaced person, often involve a process of personal transformation, involving the disruption of 'old

patterns of meaning and constructing new ways of seeing the self and the world' (Dirkx, 1998). As refugees adapt to their new life, with all its challenges and hardships, they draw from their existing knowledge and skills and also learn – through adult education and extension programmes – new knowledge and skills (for example, to do with agriculture, business, financial literacy, etc.). Refugees might also undergo shifts in attitude as they deal with their experience of displacement.

Socio-cultural and economic collectives and networks are very important in helping refugees cope with their new lives. Community support and solidarity extends beyond the practical to include emotional and psychological well-being. 'Social capital in the form of horizontal connections' (Cottyn, 2016) becomes a vital part of a displaced person's resilience and strength in adapting to a new way of life. For example, groups might pool financial resources to meet their subsistence needs, and/or engage in agriculture practices built around learning cohorts (Awidi and Quan-Baffour, 2020).

Conclusion

Forced and protracted displacement causes major disruption in people's lives, including to their food systems. As seen in the example of the Kyaka II refugee settlement, refugees exhibit strength and resilience in the face of many challenges and struggles. They participate in livelihood adaptation in new and unfamiliar contexts and also in the preservation of their food systems. Ultimately, these impact positively on food security. Adult education has a significant part to play in achieving this.



A backyard vegetable garden in Kyaka II

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- 3 The food system is a complex web of activities involving production, processing, transport and consumption. Issues concerning the food system include the governance and economics of food production, its sustainability, the degree to which we waste food, how food production affects the natural environment and the impact of food on individual and population health (Oxford Martin Programme on the Future of Food c/o Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford).
- 4 Uganda hosts 1,599,188 refugees (Office of the Prime Minister, UNHCR, Government of Uganda, 29 February 2024).
- 5 Refugees in Uganda generally enjoy freedom of movement within the country, access to work opportunities, education and basic services.
- 6 Interlocking constellations form webs of connections that transverse essentialising categories of social difference and contribute to shared biographies that allow for cultivating emotional attachments to a place and its people (Ho, 2017).
- 7 The World Food Programme is an international organisation within the United Nations that provides food assistance worldwide.
- 8 The case study of the Kyaka II refugee settlement was carried out among adult learners in Common Interest Groups (CIGs) engaged in various community development programmes.
- 9 Not their real name.

Endnotes

- 1 The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) defines 'forced displacement' as: displaced "as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations".
- 2 The Kyaka II settlement exhibits the same physical difficulties as most camps; it is located in rural remote communities in Southwestern Uganda, with very limited access to social services (Awidi, 2020). A study on refugee livelihoods was conducted there in 2019/20.