Introduction

Uganda is one of the largest refugee-hosting nations in the world and has been hosting refugees and asylum seekers since it attained independence in 1962. Today, the country hosts more than 1.4 million refugees mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Rwanda, and Burundi who escaped from war and violence and now mostly live in refugee settlements in different parts of the country.1 Refugees and host communities try to maintain good relationships and share a number of social services including land, schools, and hospitals. Despite the relatively positive relations, tensions have always existed between refugees and host communities mainly due to competition over local resources like land and firewood. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these tensions as needs continue to rise.

Initially, the Government of Uganda (GoU) imposed a number of restrictive measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, limiting interaction between the refugees and host communities and creating a strain on resources and access to services such as maternal, reproductive, child health, and psychosocial support services. However, the majority of these restrictions have been eased since October 2020, and interaction has resumed.

Data collection and analysis

Data for the second conflict snapshot report for Uganda was gathered between 23 and 25 January 2021 in refugee settlements and host communities in the following target zones: Boroli Refugee Settlement in Adjumani District (Northern Uganda) and Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Isingiro District (Western Uganda). This report was prepared by the Search for Common Ground (Search) Uganda team, with support from Search’s COVID-19 Response Programming Team and Institutional Learning Team. For more information on the data collection methodology and tools used by Search for Common Ground for this research, click here. This report is part of a series of regular conflict snapshots aimed at providing quick and actionable answers to a set of specific questions. The previous report for Uganda can be found here.

To cite this report: Search for Common Ground, Uganda Conflict Snapshot, May 2021.

* This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Search for Common Ground and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

1. UNHCR, Refugee Portal, April 2021.
Update: COVID-19 Measures and Impact on Conflict

As of the end of February 2021, the total number of reported COVID-19 cases was 40,335 and 334 deaths among Ugandans since the pandemic began in March 2020, as well as 394 cases and 7 deaths among refugees. However, the number of monthly reported cases declined by 95% from December 2020 to February 2021. A reduction in case numbers might be due to the low number of people who are going for COVID-19 testing in health facilities (a decline by 42% in the same period).

Now, testing mostly accounts for travelers and frontline workers, and therefore actual case numbers may be greater than official statistics show. Affordability is a major barrier to testing, as it costs between 50 and 65 USD to get tested – for many, this equals their monthly wage. Moreover, test results are no longer shared online (via e-mail or SMS) and people are required to obtain results in-person at testing centers, creating an additional deterrent to get tested. Nonetheless, the GoU has continued to relax some lockdown measures, including opening education institutions for all students, shortening the curfew, and opening up travel for all districts within the country. Income generating activities had been disrupted by restrictions on movement, suspension of transport, nighttime curfews, and other preventive measures. Vulnerable communities, including refugees whose incomes were already low, are some of the worst hit by the economic downturn.

COVID-19 is still perceived as a “foreign” disease by some and refugees are often assumed as likely transmitters and consequently experience heightened stigma. However, following media awareness raising on the pandemic (including Search’s media programmes targeting Northern and Western Uganda), there has been a noticeable decline in the stigmatisation of refugees by both the host community and relevant health and district authorities. However, suspicion and mistrust between refugees and host communities persists, particularly in Northern Uganda. Tensions have increased between refugees and host communities in Adjumani district due to the entry of refugees and other South Sudanese nationals (often relatives of refugees), many of whom were held by host community leaders and accused of bringing COVID-19 into the country.

Moreover, the World Food Programme (WFP) further reduced the monthly relief cash and food rations for refugees in Uganda due to a funding shortfall. With effect from February 2021, refugees received only 40% of a full ration. The most vulnerable women, children and elderly are increasingly at risk of malnourishment. The current food ration cut coincided with the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns, and both are major contributors to hunger in all refugee settlements in Uganda. The food cuts will further weaken an already vulnerable population and more competition for food and land might arise in the wake of heightened food insecurity.

The vaccination process began in March 2021 for both refugees and host community members, with health workers, those above 70 years, and those with underlying health conditions being prioritised. Only 706,626 people were vaccinated by May 2021, which represents less than 2% of the total population. Reluctance is high among both refugees and host communities because of various rumours circulating about the vaccine. A recent study shows that vaccine acceptance is low in Uganda, with only 37% of Ugandan medical students willing to be vaccinated. High vaccine hesitancy among health workers is likely to further increase hesitancy among the general population. However, with the most recent dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases since May 2021, vaccine acceptance seems to be on the rise.

---

4. According to the Ministry of Health’s website, only 49,873 samples were tested in February 2021 compared to the 120,142 samples which were tested in December 2020.
6. Reported by a Deputy Settlement Commander during a discussion with the Search Uganda Team during data collection, explaining that host community members often walk away from refugees, whisper or point fingers at them, and health workers are reluctant to treat them in the health centres.
7. Although it is illegal, some refugees are moving away from the refugee settlement and going back occasionally to their country of origin to work in their gardens or to attend family events.
COVID-19’s Impact on Social Cohesion & Trust

Trust in media reporting on the pandemic increased considerably among host communities and refugees and so has informal information sharing.

The top trusted sources to get information about COVID-19 are:

- Radio: 38%
- TV: 29%
- Friends and family: 15%
- Mobile phones: 11%

Search produces radio programmes to provide a platform for listeners to learn about COVID-19.¹¹

Out of those who listen to our programmes:

- Trust (very much or mostly) the information shared about COVID-19: 79% (Jan 21) vs. 58% (Sept 20)
- Trust (rarely, somewhat) do not trust it: 18% (Jan 21) vs. 18% (Sept 20)
- Do not trust it: 2% (Jan 21) vs. 25% (Sept 20)

An increase in trust might reflect the general uptick in information sharing and awareness raising about COVID-19 by the GoU and other actors, including Search for Common Ground’s radio programming.

Consider social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter) trustworthy sources of information about the pandemic.

Listen to our radio programmes in Northern Uganda

Generally, more sensitisation activities have been conducted among host communities compared to refugee settlements, and more information, education and communication (IEC) materials were distributed in national languages. Additionally, host community members tend to have greater access to radios and mobile phones than refugee groups.

In Western Uganda, trust in COVID-19 related information disseminated by any radio station increased among both host communities and refugees.

Listenership groups were created by Search for Common Ground, known as Community Influencers. People from both refugee settlements and host communities in the target locations who are engaged within these groups are encouraged to listen to our radio programme and disseminate information to those who are not able to listen to the programmes. They also help in translating where need be. Mobile radios are provided to these groups as radio is the main source of information. Also, some radio productions were developed in the settlements and voices were recorded, hence people were eager to listen to their own voices.

Information sharing on COVID-19 increased dramatically. Overall, more respondents are sharing information heard on trusted media with friends or family. Increased information sharing is likely due to strong information sharing and awareness raising by the government and other actors. Additionally, the lifting of travel restrictions between districts allows people to move around and share information more easily with friends.

There has been a dramatic increase in information sharing on COVID-19 by respondents in both target regions.

¹¹ Search produces public service announcements and short radio spots, radio dramas, magazines and joint broadcasts in different languages (Swahili, Juba Arabic, Madi, Dinka, Nuer, and Bali). In Northern Uganda, Search partners with Voice of the Nile and Radio Amani; in Western Uganda, we partner with Voice of Kamwenge, Radio Nyumbani, Radio West, and refugee community Radio Neema Sauti, run by a local church and whom Search equipped with basic materials (speakers, amplifiers, microphones, etc.).

¹² In January 2021, respondents in Western Uganda were asked about trusting COVID-19 information heard on radio stations in general (like in the first round of data collection in September 2020), as we had not yet started broadcasting there. In Northern Uganda, the question was about our media programmes specifically. Overall, levels of trust in COVID-19 information heard on our media programmes and on radio stations in general are very similar.
Overall, higher requests for COVID-19 services, higher satisfaction, and higher trust in the GoU and COVID-19 responders, but with noticeable regional differences

More people from Northern Uganda requested services compared to Western Uganda, regardless of the service provider. And more refugees are requesting services than host community members, from all service providers combined.

The government and INGOs are the top two service providers for both host communities and refugees, but with significant variations. Governmental facilities are far away from the refugee settlements, particularly health facilities, while INGOs services are easily accessible by both refugee and host community groups. Moreover, real or perceived fears often deter refugees from requesting services from the government, as they try to avoid contact with governmental institutions as much as possible.

Overall, the top-requested services among both refugees and host communities remain health and access to food.

The reduction in food rations by the WFP has clearly increased needs among refugees.

Satisfaction levels with services provided by any provider

Satisfaction with government-provided COVID-19 related services increased dramatically.

Improved governmental service provision was likely due to the electoral period, and respondents were particularly satisfied with the provision of face masks as well as food and water distribution.

13. This is the highest rate reported across the 6 target countries where we are carrying out these snapshots. All other country reports can be accessed on our "Working together against Corona" web page.

14. No noticeable differences of loss of income were found between host community members and refugees.
Out of those who requested COVID-19 related services from INGOs:

- Highly satisfied and satisfied: 69%
- Somewhat satisfied: 11%
- Not satisfied: 18%
- Never received a response: 2%

There is a significant variation between Western and Northern Uganda regarding satisfaction with INGO services. Due to the pandemic there is now more presence of INGOs in Western Uganda than before, which might account for higher satisfaction levels.

As explained above, people in Western Uganda, especially people in the host communities, are not used to receiving this level of service provision by INGOs and therefore may be more satisfied in general given the recent increase. Lower levels of satisfaction with INGO support among refugees may also be driven by the recent cut in food rations by WFP and deteriorated living conditions in the refugee settlements overall.

Respondents’ Trust in Government:

- Believe the government is doing its best to consider the needs of everyone equally when making decisions about COVID-19 services: 61% to 72%
- Do not trust the government: 27% to 16%

The eased lockdown measures as well as improved service provision might account for the increase.

Respondents’ Trust in Non-governmental actors:

- Trust that non-governmental actors working on COVID-19 have their best interest in mind when they are doing their work: 68% to 75%
- Disagree: 18% to 12%

Respondents in Northern Uganda trust COVID-19 responders slightly more than in Western Uganda.
Collaboration and interaction between host communities and refugees increased dramatically in Western Uganda, as a direct result of the pandemic

In Uganda, horizontal cohesion has improved more in Western than in Northern Uganda. In general, host community members and refugees in Northern Uganda have more circumstantial factors that tend to contribute to higher levels of horizontal cohesion, such as language and proximity between host communities and refugee settlements. While in Western Uganda, host community members and refugees mostly interact based on needs and have fewer opportunities to build cohesion. However, the pandemic has created opportunities for improved horizontal cohesion in Western Uganda and many are now interacting across divides for the first time.

During the Search organised conflict sensitivity training for host community and refugee members in Western Uganda in December 2020, many of them expressed their appreciation to meet different people and for some this was the first time to sit with people from the other group in the same room.

There are variations between host community members and refugees in both regions. In Western Uganda, more host community members than refugees value this kind of collaboration. In Northern Uganda, fewer host community members than refugees value this kind of collaboration.

Due to normative roles as explained in the first report, more women report not interacting with individuals from another group compared to men.

The interaction between host community members and refugees is higher in Western Uganda, compared to Northern Uganda. At the regional level, there is a variation between host community members and refugees. In Western Uganda, more host community members interacted with refugees than Northern Uganda.

Less women feel safe compared to men

More people in Western Uganda feel safe when interacting with other individuals, compared to Northern Uganda.
Next Steps For COVID-19 Response Efforts

Response providers should capitalise on improved horizontal cohesion for pandemic response

- Our data shows significant increases in horizontal cohesion between refugees and host communities, especially in Western Uganda. This creates a unique opportunity to integrate collaboration across divides to improve the COVID-19 response. Not only can collaborative approaches for pandemic response promote overall confidence in and acceptance of response measures, it can also mitigate tensions and conflict that can arise between groups throughout the process. Additionally, since women have fewer opportunities to interact across divides, they should be better integrated into response measures, in safe ways, to improve their opportunities for interaction as well as ensure their needs are being met.

As needs increase, governmental and non-governmental responders should seek to maintain relatively high levels of satisfaction in service provision

- As citizens and refugees contend with food cuts, loss of livelihoods, and other socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, needs will continue to rise. To manage expectations and avoid frustrations, response providers should communicate transparently about existing capacities to respond to requests. Additionally, to improve trust in the overall pandemic response, including the vaccination campaign, response providers should include citizens and refugees in response strategies to ensure all needs are being considered as well as identify community-based solutions to emerging challenges and capacity limitations.

Strong access to information on COVID-19 should continue and communication strategies should include opportunities for dialogue and engagement

- Response providers should continue to ensure accessibility of information for both citizens and refugees, particularly as vaccination efforts are underway and as socio-economic needs continue to rise. Additionally, high levels of information sharing demonstrate high levels of agency among respondents to play a role in pandemic response. This can be channeled into dialogue and engagement across media outlets, including radio, TV, in-person, and online. Not only can dialogue help both citizens and refugees identify solutions to emerging challenges, it can also promote unity throughout the pandemic, which will remain important as the secondary effects will play out in the medium and long term.