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Formal Social Support Influence on Socio-Economic Rights of Refugees in Uganda's Refugee Settlements

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of 117.3 million globally displaced persons — 75% hosted in low- and middle-income countries — this study examines the influence of formal social support systems on refugees' access to socio-economic rights in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements in Northern Uganda, where progressive legal frameworks, including the Refugee Act 2006 and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, provide a unique institutional context for refugee protection. The study was guided by three objectives: (i) assessing the level of formal support available to refugees; (ii) evaluating refugees' access to socio-economic rights across education, healthcare, water and sanitation, and livelihood; and (iii) examining the relationship between formal support systems and access to these rights. A triangulation convergence mixed methods design was employed, combining quantitative surveys (n = 400, drawn from 220,331 refugees using Slovin's formula) with qualitative key informant interviews (n = 15) and focus group discussions (n = 55). The findings revealed a robust formal support system (mean = 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale), with humanitarian organisations rated higher (mean = 4.35) than government services (mean = 3.68). Refugees reported a high overall level of access to socio-economic rights (mean = 3.7), with healthcare (3.85) and water/sanitation (3.72) scoring highest, while livelihood and employment opportunities scored lowest (3.38). Regression analysis confirmed a statistically

significant positive relationship between formal support systems and access to socio-economic rights ($F(1, 397) = 81.585, p < 0.001$). However, persistent constraints included inadequate physical infrastructure, declining donor funding (UCRRP funded at only 15% of the USD 858 million requirement in 2024), and restrictive eligibility criteria excluding refugees from national empowerment programs. The novelty of this study lies in shifting the academic focus from informal to formal support mechanisms by empirically linking institutional structures to specific dimensions of socio-economic rights. The findings provide actionable guidance for policymakers, development actors, and humanitarian agencies designing context-specific support systems for refugee settlements transitioning from humanitarian relief to long-term development.

Keywords: Formal social support, Socio-economic rights, Refugee protection, Uganda, Refugee settlements; Humanitarian-development nexus, Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.

Introduction

The record of forced movement started in prehistory and has continued to recur even today, almost everywhere in the world. The UNHCR Global Trends Report 2023 estimates that there were 117.3 million forcibly displaced persons at the end of 2023 globally, of which 31.6 million are refugees, and 75% of all forcibly displaced persons are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2023). This rise is largely due to protracted conflicts and crises, with the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa being major regions of origin. (Hathaway, 2018). Many refugees remain in camps or urban settlements for extended periods, without a durable solution (UNHCR, 2023). UNHCR further notes that most of these refugees have lived in exile for far too long, restricted to camps or eking out a meagre existence, subsisting in a state of limbo and are often dependent on others to find solutions to their plight. These long-term situations present significant challenges to both the displaced populations and the countries or communities hosting them (UNHCR, 2025). A growing number of refugees live in urban settings, moving away from traditional camps. This shift has created new obstacles in providing basic services and ensuring adequate protection, while also reducing the pressure on rural communities that are often underserved with social services and amenities (UNHCR, 2016). Dealing with such a complex and ever-evolving issue requires a concerted, multifaceted, and intertwined approach for robust solutions that can address the unique socio-economic and political environments in which refugees find themselves.

Globally, there is increased restrictionism on the asylum space, forcing refugees and asylum seekers to resort to extremely dangerous routes and options in seeking asylum. Protection and Safety are major concerns for refugees fleeing under such circumstances. Refugees often face extreme risks, including violence, trafficking, and exploitation, both during their journey and in host countries. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and trafficking (Koser & Martin, 2011). Refugees fleeing war-torn regions like Syria, Venezuela, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan are at high risk of recruitment by armed groups, as well as physical and psychological trauma from conflict (Hathaway, 2018). Another critical challenge is that refugees often face significant barriers to healthcare, education, and sanitation, particularly in overcrowded camps or informal settlements where the government social service sector is limited, and humanitarian presence or access is limited. These conditions exacerbate their living conditions, including the spread of infectious diseases, and prevent refugees from leading productive lives (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Refugee children, for example, are at risk of being denied education, which further hinders their integration into society and future employment opportunities.

Countries hosting large numbers of refugees, such as Uganda, often face overwhelming economic and social pressure. Refugees contribute to increasing demands for food, water, shelter, and healthcare, while local populations may experience heightened competition for jobs and resources (UNHCR, 2018a). This strain can lead to tensions between refugees and host communities, making integration and social cohesion difficult (International Organization for Migration, 2022). When not effectively handled, this

can result in xenophobia and political backlash against refugees. Indeed, anti-refugee sentiments are a growing concern globally and are more prominent in developed countries with a growing level of nationalist policies that are shrinking the asylum space. These have resulted in restrictive immigration policies and social exclusion, making it harder for refugees to access asylum and protection. Generally, most political and social activists have viewed refugees negatively, portraying them as a threat to national security, political stability and economic progress (Wimmer et al, 2025).

The international community through commitments like the Global Compact on refugees and the comprehensive refugee response framework have sought to promote a shared understanding and responsibility by countries on the refugee issue, recognising that Countries from the global South, with thinner resources and capacity bear the greatest burden as they host the largest numbers of refugees (UNHCR, 2018b). This is to be achieved through financial and technical support as well as the advancement of durable solutions. While these compacts offer an array of hope for the underdeveloped countries, their non-binding nature makes implementation and attainability complex. Resultantly, Countries with the resources and capacity decide where and when their resources and support are directed, resulting in neglecting some of the direst situations (Hathaway, 2005). Despite the huge need for resettlement, the opportunities have remained low, with a meagre proportion of refugees getting a chance each year (International Organisation for Migration, 2024). Besides, prospects for voluntary return have vanished amongst most refugee populations due to the protracted nature of conflicts and a lack of political will to resolve such conflicts (International Organisation for Migration, 2022).

This has been compounded by the growing impact of climate change on displacement situations globally. In the recent past, climatic shocks including mud slides, prolonged droughts, floods and other natural disasters have had a great contribution to refugee outflows globally, yet they do not fit in the classical definition of refugees as per the 1951 refugee convention, its 1967 protocol and regional instruments like the AU convention of 1969. A continuous rise in environmental factors may result in an unprecedented number of refugees who are in a state of limbo without a clear Agency mandated for their assistance, thereby lacking the needed legal protection and assistance accorded to those displaced by conflict or political persecution (McLeman & Gemenne, 2018). On the other hand, the rise in refugee numbers has had a great impact on the environment as demand for natural resources, including land for settlement, forest resources for construction, and economic activities of refugees, results in degradation of the natural resource base. This has, in many instances, resulted in resistance to welcoming and hosting refugees for fear of complicating an already derailed natural environment.

Finally, the urbanisation of refugee settlements presents another opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, the urbanisation of refugees has reduced pressure on hosting governments and other humanitarian actors to establish parallel infrastructure and facilities, including water systems, schools and health facilities to support the settling in of refugees (UNHCR 2016). On the other hand, many refugees have struggled to fit within the urban settings due to the inability of the urban areas to accommodate and employ the additional numbers created by the refugee situation. This has resulted in emergency refugee slum conditions, where living conditions are so dire. This shift will require a reevaluation of the urban refugee assistance program to cope with the rapidly changing urban realities in developing countries (International Organisation for Migration, 2024)

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that Uganda's refugee assistance model has been applauded for being a model in promoting integration and self-reliance of refugees through its settlement transformation agenda and the comprehensive refugee response framework (UNHCR 2018a). Key among these included the open-door policy, provision of land for refugee settlement and farming, integration of refugee programs into national development plans, promotion of a whole of society approach where Government ministries, departments and agencies together with humanitarian organisations work in tandem to ensure refugees can access basic services (Omata & Kaplan, 2013). However, donor fatigue, limited capacity of the national economy and changes in the global economy have hindered the ability of humanitarian actors and governments to harness the benefits accruing from

This is a very supportive refugee policy (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). This study was carried out in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements, where many aspects of this open-door policy have been implemented to understand how formal social support systems have influenced refugee access to basic social and economic rights.

Research Problem

This study sought to examine the influence of formal social support systems on refugees' access to socio-economic rights in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements in Northern Uganda. The primary problem this study sought to address is that while the number of refugees has exponentially grown globally, refugee assistance programs have not matched the pace of growth. As such, it is crucial to understand how formal support systems promote or inhibit access to essential services like healthcare, education, and employment (UNHCR, 2023). The study is timely given the greater emphasis on refugee integration and self-reliance that has shaped the discussions on refugee assistance programs in the recent past. The findings of this study offered worthy insights for policymakers, practitioners, and academics by refining refugee assistance programs to ensure they are responsive to the dynamic needs of refugees and the communities that host them (Spencer & Charsley, 2021).

Research Focus

The focus of the study was to understand the influence of formal support on access to education, healthcare, water, sanitation and hygiene, and livelihood and employment opportunities by refugees. A review of existing literature shows that a lot of focus has been on informal social support networks in supporting refugee integration. This study sought to fill this gap by highlighting the crucial role of formal support systems and how these systems can be enhanced for the greater good of refugees and the communities that host them.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This study sought to examine the impact of formal social support systems on access to socio-economic rights of refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements, to propose policy and practical guides on refugee assistance and add to the ongoing theoretical discussion on the broader issue of refugee integration.

Research questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What formal social support systems are available to refugees in the Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements?
2. To what extent do refugees in the Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements access their socio-economic rights?
3. How do formal social support systems influence refugees' access to socio-economic rights in the Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements?

Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to critically examine previous studies/findings on the influence of formal social support on refugees' access to socio-economic rights. It identified the themes, gaps, and debates within the literature, in so doing situating the current study within the broader academic and policy discourse. The review presents a comprehensive analysis of previous findings to enumerate, factually evaluate, and clarify preceding research. In doing so, it provides a conceptual and hypothetical foundation for the current study and helps map out the research landscape.

The literature review also recognised the contributions of former scholars, thereby strengthening the scholarly grounding and rationale of this study. Ultimately, this section is intended to orient the reader by offering a clear understanding of the progress and limitations in the field of formal support.

systems and refugees' socio-economic rights, and to underscore the relevance and necessity of this research.

Formal social support systems

The idea of social support systems and whether they exist or are necessary gained great recognition in the social sciences and humanities since the mid-1970s with the works of John Cassel, Sidney Cobb, and Gerald Caplan, who understood social support as a crucial factor in health maintenance and promotion. Dean and Lin (1977) later emphasised social support as a product of primary groups that link instrumental and expressive needs (Dean & Lin, 1977). Pearlin et al. (1981) expanded this understanding and asserted that social support is the ability to access and make use of an individual, group, or organisation to address life's variations or stressors. More recently, Turner (1999) modified this and concluded that social support includes any process through which social relationships can be utilised to promote the holistic well-being of an individual or group.

Social support systems are crucial for addressing refugee needs. Thomas (2020) developed this discussion in their study of migrants of Polish origin in America and concluded that leaving their socially cohesive Polish villages for a large and impersonal American city resulted in social disorganisation and behavioural problems for the migrants. Formal structures are a crucial source of support for effective social support. Uganda's Refugee Act (2006) and the self-reliance strategy offer a perfect example of a formal social support system (Sebba & Zanker, 2022). It aims to shift focus from humanitarian relief to a more sustainable approach by leveraging the capacities of refugees with formal support structures, offering a facilitating role.

Within this framework, humanitarian actors working with national authorities enable direct assessment of refugee conditions and the development of targeted assistance to enhance refugees' access to protection services (UNHCR, 2021). UNHCR's policy paper on human rights defines its commitment to integrating human rights standards into refugee protection and reflects a shift towards a more explicit and comprehensive understanding of the connection between refugee protection and human rights, moving away from past uncertainty (UNHCR, 2021). Such policies are crucial for guaranteeing that refugee support systems evolve to better meet their needs.

Socio-economic rights for refugees

The first modern constitutions defined rights primarily in terms of civil and political rights, or what many scholars refer to as the first generational rights. These were defined as substantive or procedural and about limits on the exercise of state power, intended to protect individuals from arbitrary interference — the rule of law, the right to a fair trial, personal liberty and the freedoms of speech, assembly, association, and religion (French, 2017). Based on this, the early national laws were perceived as symbolising a narrow version of freedom, blind to social and economic disparities, a view which was regarded as having prohibited rich and poor alike from sleeping under bridges, begging in the streets, and stealing loaves of bread. Consequently, many human rights activists from the middle of the 19th century onwards believed that civil and political rights, without improvements in social and economic conditions, offered little hope to ordinary people whose lives may be blunted by social and economic hardships (Elkins et al, 2013).

From the late 1800s and in the new democratic constitutions that followed the two World Wars, more prominence was placed on rights that protected workers against their employers and on rights that were defined in terms of positive entitlements, such as the right to education and health care. These rights are variously known as 'socio-economic rights' or 'second-generation rights'. In older literature, they were sometimes called 'positive rights', since they promoted a positive view of freedom as prospects for thriving or well-being, as contrasted against a negative view of liberty simply as non-interference (Elkins et al, 2013).

International recognition of socio-economic rights dates from the early 20th century, when the International Labour Organisation adopted a series of conventions intended to improve labour standards around the world. After World War II, international accords and legislation increasingly started to include socio-economic rights, including, most importantly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child also contain requirements relating to socio-economic rights (Elkins et al., 2013). Regional human rights documents have also codified socio-economic rights, e.g., the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights protects, inter alia, the right to work, the right to health and the right to education. Today, most constitutions contain a wide range of socio-economic rights, either as enforceable provisions or as ambitious statements or directive principles (French, 2017).

Gaps in Literature

Most studies on social support systems have broadly explored how these networks facilitate recovery and refugee integration. However, they often overlook the specific role of formal support systems in enhancing refugees' access to socio-economic rights. In addition, much of the existing literature emphasises informal support networks, such as those formed within refugee communities, while neglecting the role of institutional or formal structures in securing socio-economic entitlements. Furthermore, scholarly work on refugee rights has primarily focused on civil and political rights, particularly access to territory and protection from refoulement, while paying limited attention to socio-economic dimensions, which are essential for sustainable refugee livelihoods.

Finally, most empirical studies conducted in Rhino Camp Settlement were carried out between 2016 and 2018. Given the settlement's current phase of early recovery and transition to long-term development, the relevance of earlier findings is uncertain in the present context.

This study sought to fill these gaps by:

- Examining the influence of formal support systems in enabling refugees' access to socio-economic rights.
- Attending to the unevenness in existing literature by shifting focus from informal to formal support systems.
- Mounting the discussion on refugee rights to embrace socio-economic rights as an essential element of refugee protection.
- Presenting renewed empirical evidence from Rhino Camp to reflect the settlement's evolving context of recovery and development.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed methods approach to research, involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, mixing the two forms of data, and using discrete designs that involved philosophical assumptions and theoretical construction (Creswell et al., 2003). A Triangulation convergence mixed methods design was applied. This was intended to gather separate but complementary data on the same topic to best recognise the problem being investigated (Yin, 2018). In this model, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered separately, though at the same time using different but appropriate instruments. The two sets of data were then analysed separately using appropriate techniques. The researcher then organised the quantitative data into themes to enable easy analysis. (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). The qualitative and quantitative data sets were thereafter compared and interrelated.

Sample and Participants

This study was carried out in Imvepi and Rhinocamp refugee settlements in Terego and Madi Okollo districts. The total population for the study was 454,200, comprising all refugees and nationals.

living in Terego and Madi Okollo districts (UNHCR, 2022). The target population was 220,331, comprising the population of refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi. A sample of 400 participants was obtained for the study using Sloven’s formula for sample size determination. The sample for the quantitative study was selected using a stratified random sampling method. Stratified random sampling was preferred because it offered an unbiased approach by grouping heterogeneous populations into homogeneous subsets, then selecting within the individual subset to ensure representativeness. The strata were developed according to the geographical dispersion of the settlements, that is, with each settlement forming a stratum. For each stratum, an interval sampling method was carried out to arrive at the individual respondents. The research used the population of households of 43,4987 in Rhinocamp and Imvepi as of December 2023 to develop the interval from which an individual was selected from every 100th household. The sample size for the qualitative study was 70 individuals, which consisted of 15 individuals engaged in the KIIs and 55 individuals engaged in FGDs. This sample was selected based on an assumption that it would lead the researcher to a saturation point (Cowles, 2005). The selection of participants for the qualitative study was purposively done based on a participant’s knowledge and expertise in a thematic area under the study.

Instruments and Procedures

The study utilised several methods for data collection. The survey included a set of predetermined questions administered to a representative sample, measuring population characteristics, behaviour, attitudes, awareness, and needs. A structured questionnaire was developed, and the questions were ranked on a Likert Scale of 1-5 and administered through a Kobo Collect tool. Research assistants were supported in administering the tool through interview schedules to participants who were not able to read and write in English. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and Key informant interviews were used to obtain qualitative information from refugee participants and humanitarian workers, respectively.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis (QDA) was conducted to transform the information obtained from the KIIs and FDGs into insights about the people and circumstances investigated. Through thematic analysis, the researcher was able to identify and organise patterns across the dataset and generate themes based on general understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Quantitative data analysis was used to evaluate and transform measurable data through arithmetic methods, through categorisation, summarisation, and interpretation of findings (Cowles, 2005) and presented using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results

Study Findings on support from humanitarian organisations

Table 1 provides the study findings on support from humanitarian organisations. The study sought to examine what support systems are provided by humanitarian organisations in the settlement and how accessible they are to refugees. The views of respondents were rated on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating the strongest level of agreement among participants. The findings of the analysis are provided here.

Table 1

Study findings on support from humanitarian organisations

Area of support	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	mean	Std Dev
There is a presence of NGOs in my locality	0.25	1	0.25	53.5	45	4.42	0.583
There is the presence of UN agencies in my settlement	0	1	1	61	37	4.34	0.552
I know the services provided by humanitarian partners	0.25	1.25	0.5	59.25	38.75	4.35	0.586

Services of humanitarian partners are free	0	0.75	0.5	60.5	38	4.36	0.535
Humanitarian partners provide information on the services they provide	0	1.25	0.75	62	36	4.33	0.541
Humanitarian partners consult us on the services they can provide	0	2	1	58.25	41.25	4.36	0.61
Humanitarian partners provide services based on consultations with refugees	0.5	3	1.25	57	38.25	4.3	0.689
Humanitarian partners provide training on life skills	0.25	1	0.5	60.5	37.75	4.35	0.572
Humanitarian partners extend support to vulnerable groups	0	0.75	0.5	59.5	39.25	4.37	0.538
Humanitarian partners provide information about the services provided by the government	0.5	2	0.75	62.75	34	4.28	0.63
Average, mean, and standard deviation						4.35	0.5836

Table 1 reveals the active presence of NGOs in the settlements. Services of humanitarian organisations are provided for free, humanitarian partners consult on services they can provide, and humanitarian partners extend support to vulnerable groups, which are the areas with the highest level of agreement among respondents on this construct. The mean point for the four items with the highest level of agreement was 4.38, which is regarded as high, and the standard deviation was 0.57, which is regarded as low. The high mean therefore indicates that refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi agree that there is the presence of NGOs in their locality, that the services of humanitarian organisations are free, humanitarian organisations consult refugees on what services to provide, and humanitarian organisations extend support to the most vulnerable members of the population.

These findings conformed to the findings from the qualitative study. For instance, participants during the FGDs reiterated the role of NGOs and humanitarian organisations in engaging with the refugee community. A participant was quoted as saying, “There are many NGOs and UN agencies that work with the refugees. Others are working in schools, others in health centres, while others support us with basic needs. Usually, NGOs conduct assessments to identify our needs, and they provide the services based on the assessments”.

According to a community services expert from DRC, the settlement has a well-structured approach of engaging with the refugees, with NGOs dedicated to engaging with communities to identify the needs of refugees and extremely vulnerable persons. Through this system, NGOs and UN agencies have been able to offer support to extremely vulnerable individuals. Participants noted during the FGD that “We get different forms of assistance from NGOs. This includes mobility appliances for those with impairments, scholastic materials for learners from extremely vulnerable households, cash assistance to meet basic needs, construction of shelter and provision of clothing. With refugees recognising such a level of support, it implies that this plays a crucial role, thereby qualifying NGOs, UN agencies and government systems as an integral part of the support system within the refugee community.

The findings above validate previous research work that emphasises the role of humanitarian organisations in a refugee setting. The findings from the study underscore a strong positive perception among refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi regarding the support provided by humanitarian organisations. For instance, Clemens et al. (2018) established that refugees in Uganda feel well-supported by NGOs in their locality, which is crucial for their well-being and integration. These findings further highlight the role of humanitarian organisations in addressing the needs of refugees and ensuring that assistance reaches those most in need (Strohmeier et al., 2025).

The above findings further indicate that formal support is well-regarded among refugees; there are specific areas where the perception of support is weak, including the provision of information on government services and the provision of services based on refugee consultations. UNHCR has

emphasised that Information dissemination on government services is crucial for the effective integration of refugees into national programs and policies, as it helps them navigate available resources and entitlements (UNHCR, 2018a). Additionally, ensuring that services are based on consultations with refugees helps tailor assistance to their specific needs, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of humanitarian support (Jacobsen, 2002).

Support from the central and local governments

Table 2 provides the study findings on support from central and local government. The study sought to examine what support systems are provided by central and local governments in the settlements and how accessible they are to refugees. The views of respondents were rated on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating the strongest level of agreement among participants. The findings of the analysis are provided here.

Table 2

Study findings on support from central and local governments

Support from the host government	SDA F (%)	DA F (%)	N F (%)	A F (%)	SA F (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
I know Government officials working in my settlement	2.5	13.8	18.8	50.8	14	3.61	0.975
We can approach the government staff	1.75	12.5	21.7	53.5	10.5	3.59	0.9
Government staff can listen to concerns raised by refugees	0.5	12.2	18.8	59.7	8.8	3.64	0.826
Government services are accessible to refugees	1	6.8	19.7	64	8.5	3.72	0.753
Government services reinforce the refugee and host community relationship	1	4.2	13.8	72	9	3.84	0.68
Government services reinforce relationships within refugee groups	0.8	3.2	12.3	72	11	3.89	0.663
Government staff consult refugees on what services to provide	2.3	12.3	12.5	61	12	3.68	0.916
Government staff provide the services that refugees need	4.5	16.3	15.3	55.5	8.5	3.47	1.008
Refugees can complain to government staff about the services they receive.	1.75	7.5	16.8	67.5	7	3.71	0.777
Average, mean, and standard deviation						3.68	

The study established that the ability of government services to reinforce the relationship between refugees and the host community, accessibility of government services to refugees and refugees' ability to complain to government staff about the services they receive had the highest level of agreement among study participants. The combined mean average of the 4 items with the highest level of agreement was 3.79, with a standard deviation of 0.718. The relatively high mean and very low standard deviation imply that refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi believe government services reinforce the relationship within refugee groups, government services reinforce the relationship between refugees and the host community, government services are accessible to refugees and that refugees can complain to government staff about the services they receive.

The above findings concur with the findings from the qualitative study. For instance, during an interview with UNHCR's community-based protection officer, she noted increased efforts to streamline service provision between refugees and the host community. "For now, we are focusing on transitioning services. Most health centres and schools are being integrated into the normal government service.

delivery. Through this approach, refugees and nationals interact at service points, and this has reinforced the relationship between refugees and the nationals.

Participants during the FGDs also pointed out increased accessibility to government services and the presence of complaint mechanisms where they can report inefficiencies to the government. The government staff have strengthened the skills and capacities of refugees in different ways. During the FGDs with refugee leaders, a woman representative noted that “When we first came into the settlement, we were scared to take leadership positions because we believed women cannot lead”. However, OPM encouraged and supported them to take leadership positions in the settlement and provided them with different trainings, which have increased their ability to lead. Through the monthly meetings between refugee welfare councils and the office of the prime minister, refugee leaders have the opportunity to aggregate concerns from the refugee communities and present them to government officials for deliberation and action.

The above findings corroborate previous research findings on the role of government support in strengthening refugee networks. The findings reflect a generally positive perception among refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi regarding the support provided by both central and local government services, particularly in terms of fostering relationships and accessibility. The strongest agreement was on the ability of government services to reinforce relationships among different refugee groups, with a mean score of 3.89 and a low standard deviation of 0.663, indicating a consensus on this benefit (Salkind, 2017). This suggests that refugees feel that government services are effective in promoting cohesion and solidarity within their communities, which is crucial for maintaining social support networks and reducing isolation (UNHCR, 2022). This can be achieved through enhancing refugee participation in formal support structures (Ager & Strang, 2008).

On the other hand, Table 2 presents the areas with the least level of agreement, as government staff provide the services that refugees need, refugees can approach government staff, refugees know the government officials working in their localities, and government staff can listen to the concerns raised by refugees. The average mean for the items with the least agreement under the government support was 3.578 with a standard deviation of 0.927. The relatively low mean score implies that there was low agreement among respondents, and the high standard deviation implies high variability of the views of the respondents.

The above findings correlate with findings from the qualitative study. Participants from both the KII and FGD noted immense challenges for refugees accessing services provided by the government. There was generally great concern regarding the services provided by the local governments not reaching the community. An OPM community services officer in Imvepi notes that “The district headquarters for Terego, where Imvepi refugee settlement is situated, is far, and district officials rarely come into the settlement. Because of this, refugees rarely can interact with them”.

Besides, participants during the FGDs noted that there are several Government programs which are specifically meant for nationals only. As such, refugees do not have access. A woman representative noted during the FGDs with refugee leaders that “There are many government programs aimed at empowering the vulnerable, like PDM (parish development model), *Emyooga* (Government of Uganda youth empowerment program and support to old persons where they ask for your national ID before you are registered”. Such a restrictive government program limits the ability of refugees to benefit from Government support.

The above findings reveal lower levels of agreement among refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi regarding several aspects of government support, including the adequacy of services provided by government staff, accessibility, familiarity with officials, and responsiveness to concerns. This low mean indicates that respondents generally feel less positive about these aspects of government support, reflecting possible gaps in service adequacy and accessibility (Jacobsen, 2002). The high standard deviation suggests considerable variability in refugees' experiences and perceptions, highlighting that

while some may find government services and staff interactions satisfactory, others face significant challenges (Salkind, 2017). Jacobsen (2002) further recognised the critical role of government support in enhancing refugee integration.

Study findings on access to socio-economic rights.

Refugee access to education

Table 3 provides the study findings on refugee access to education. The study sought to examine the extent to which refugees were able to access quality basic education. The views of respondents were rated on a Likert scale of 1-5 with 5 indicating the strongest level of agreement among participants. The findings of the analysis are provided here under.

Table 3

Study findings on refugee access to education

Measure of access	SDA (%)	DA (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Refugees are involved in education planning	1.5	9.75	6.25	79	3.5	3.73	0.74
Children/youth are involved in planning and implementing education programs	2.25	10.5	7.25	76.75	3.25	3.68	0.79
Village education committees hold meetings to conduct educational social inquiry	1.5	7.5	9.25	77	4.75	3.76	0.72
Community is trained on education management	0.5	4	4	83.75	7.75	3.94	0.57
Children can access schools within 5-kilometer radius	9.25	15	5.75	53	17	3.54	1.2
The learning environment is safe for children	0.75	4	1.75	74.5	19	4.07	0.66
The learning environment promotes mental wellbeing of learners	0.25	3.75	3.75	80.5	11.75	4	0.57
Each class accommodates 55 learners at a time	21.25	42.5	1	30.25	5	2.55	1.26
No individual is denied access to education	0.75	4.25	3.75	68.25	23	4.09	0.71
Documents or other requirements are not a barrier to education	4.25	14.25	1.5	61.5	18.5	3.76	1.05
Education program is recognized by authorities in the country of origin and country of asylum	0	2.75	1.75	76.75	18.75	4.12	0.55
Education programs address the needs of refugees now and when they return	0	1	1	77	21	4.18	0.48
Education certificates issued in COO are recognised in COA	0	1.25	1.25	65.5	32	4.28	0.55
Each teacher handles a maximum of 50 learners at a time	18	41.75	0.5	28.5	11.25	2.7	1.3
School teachers have the required skills	0	3.5	1.5	69.25	25.75	4.2	0.6
There is no parallel education system for refugees	1	3.5	0.75	75.75	19	4.1	0.6
Each desk accommodates a maximum of 3 learners	20	45.25	0.25	30.5	4	2.5	1.2
There are sufficient textbooks for learners	17.25	28.75	5.25	45.25	3.5	2.9	1.2

The skills provided to learners are appropriate for their development	0.25	6.25	4.25	81.25	8	3.9	0.6
Average, Mean, and Standard Deviation						3.68	0.8

The findings reveal that education certificates issued by the country of origin (COO) are duly recognised in the country of asylum (COA). The above findings correlate with the findings from the qualitative study. According to UNHCR’s education expert, partners are working with the Ministry of Education and sports and the national council for higher education and sports to ensure that foreign certificates or diplomas can be equated to Ugandan standards. Recognition of educational documents is crucial for refugees to continue with their education and access the labour market for both liberal and non-liberal professions. The high level of agreement on the recognition of educational certificates highlights an effective policy environment for educational integration in Uganda. This finding is significant as it suggests Uganda has mechanisms in place to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications, as alluded to in the qualitative data presented above. This can greatly enhance the educational and professional opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers.

The above findings align with the findings of previous researchers. For instance, Loo (2016) emphasizes that effective credential recognition is crucial for the successful integration of refugees and asylum seekers into the host society. Similarly, the European Commission (2020) reports that streamlined recognition procedures can significantly improve the educational and employment outcomes for refugees. In contrast to other regions where recognition processes are less supportive, the findings from this study suggest Uganda may offer a more accommodating and efficient system to support the integration of refugees into the education system, but the broader socio-economic environment in general.

The findings further highlighted the role of increased safety in the learning environment, greater recognition and integration of refugee education into the broader national education systems and equitable access to education in enhancing refugee education. The findings from the qualitative study made a similar emphasis. Participants in the qualitative study noted increased access to basic and primary education for refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements. It was noted that the design of the education program is in line with the Government’s education policy and standards. An education expert from UNHCR noted that more schools were established to meet the requirements due to the high density in the refugee settlements compared to the national average density for rural areas. An official from Windle International Uganda noted, "Most learners in primary and early childhood care and development (ECDC) can access education facilities within a range of 3 Kilometres, which is within the national average." Regarding physical safety at schools, adolescents during the FGD recognised the tremendous efforts by humanitarian actors to establish and strengthen mechanisms for child safety in schools. Through these initiatives, a culture of respect and dignity for fundamental rights and privileges has been promoted, which has promoted the safety of the school environment.

Previous studies have highlighted improved access, safety and integration of learners into the education systems. Findings by the Refugee Law Project (Tulibaleka, 2022) indicate that Uganda’s education system is very inclusive and supports refugee learners. Similarly, that refugee education in its diverse forms has provided a sense of structure, belonging and purpose, thus serving as a bulwark against the negative impacts of rupture and loneliness. Despite this, Tulibaleka (2022) noted increased conflict, classroom congestion, and lack of facilities as serious issues affecting refugee access to education.

Ensuring an inclusive and purposeful education is crucial for refugees' social and economic well-being. This position is reiterated by the UNHCR education strategy 2010-2012, which emphasised the development of human capital through universal primary education, alluding that access to education involves the ability to enrol in school and to continue one’s studies through to the end of a given level

(UNHCR, 2016). This entails having a school system that can accommodate all people with different needs, an education system that will support the cognitive development of the learners and a learning system that provides relevant skills and opportunities for refugee learners to thrive in the country of asylum as well as when they return to their countries of origin. The above findings point to that realisation.

It is crucial to note that there was a strong agreement on the safety of the learning environment in the qualitative and quantitative studies, with a mean score of 4.07 recorded in the quantitative study. This suggests a positive perception of the safety provided in educational settings for refugee children. They have exemplified the role of a safe environment in learners' academic success and mental health. A study by Duuki pointed out that educational programs should address the mental health needs of refugees to facilitate their academic and social integration. This is crucial, as refugee students who are struggling to recover from the mental and psychological distress occasioned by displacement adjust to fit within the learning environment (Duuki, 2023).

The study further established that no learner is denied access to education based on social factors. This underscores a commitment to educational equity, ensuring that education is accessible to all, regardless of social background. Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019) emphasised the significance of non-discriminatory practices in education for refugees. Additionally, the study noted that education programs can address the needs of refugees both in the present and for their potential return to the COO. This reflects a belief that educational programs are designed with immediate and long-term considerations for refugees. This conforms with the findings of on the importance of adaptability in educational programs to support refugees' integration and prospects.

The areas with the lowest level of agreement were on whether each desk accommodates a maximum of 3 learners. The mean for this item was 2.5, which is considered low, with a standard deviation of 1.2, which is regarded as high. The above finding indicates that the national standard of 3 learners per desk is not being met, and the standard deviation of 1.2 indicates a high level of variability within the settlements, with some schools operating within the threshold while others operating far above. Overall, the items with lower means were pupil desk ratio, teacher pupil ratio, pupil classroom ratio and sufficiency of textbooks to learners.

The above finding corroborates the findings from the qualitative study, which indicated that while there is increased physical access and safety of the learning environment, efficiency ratios remain low across all levels of education in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements. The concern of low attainment of the efficiency ratios was highlighted both during the FGDs and the KIIs. Of major concern was the high enrolment figures versus the facilities to support the high numbers. The OPM education focal point in Imvepi noted that most challenges are linked to funding, making it hard to meet the standards. She observed that,

“There is overcrowding of learners in class, especially in the primary section, thereby affecting concentration and performance. In some schools, there are up to 200 learners in a single classroom, and it becomes hard for the teacher to control the classroom. There are also inadequate school facilities like desks, teaching and learning aids and other instructional materials. Because of the classroom congestion, about 7 learners in lower primary and 5 in upper primary share a single desk”.

The above findings also conform to existing literature on refugee education, indicating that refugee school efficiency ratios usually fall below national standards. The mean score of 2.5 indicates a low level of agreement among respondents on the desk ratio fitting within national standards. The high standard deviation 1.2 reflects significant variability across different schools or settlements. This variability means that while some schools may meet or be close to meeting the standard, others fall significantly short, resulting in a heterogeneous distribution of desk accommodation standards. This finding is worrying as overcrowded desks can impact student comfort and learning outcomes negatively, as noted

by Education Cannot Wait (2025). A study by Berg (2023) further highlighted infrastructural and material challenges facing refugees' education.

The above challenges provide a clear reflection on the funding situation for the refugee response in Uganda. According to the mid-year funding update for all partners responding to refugee situation in Uganda released by UNHCR in July 2024, the 2024 Uganda Country refugee Response plan (UCRRP) funding requirement of USD 858M for 96 partners involved in the refugee response was funded at 15% (USD 126.1 Million) by end of June 2024, At the time of the report, the education sector stood as the most funded sector at 27% (32 million of the required 118 M), thought it was 72% short of its funding requirements.

Refugee access to water and sanitation services

Table 4 provides the study findings on refugee access to water, sanitation and hygiene services. The study examined how much refugees can access these services and what quality standards are being observed. Respondents' views were rated on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating the strongest level of agreement among participants. The findings of the analysis are provided here.

Table 4

Study findings on access to water, sanitation and hygiene

Refugee access to WASH	SDA (%)	DA (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
I can access a minimum of 20 Liters of water per day.	11.25	7	0	62	19.5	3.71	1.191
The water we obtain is safe and clean	1	2.75	4	82.5	9.75	3.97	0.581
We access water at an affordable cost	1.75	9.75	5.5	71	12	3.82	0.831
Water is available for short- and long-term needs	9.25	18.25	1	66.5	5	3.4	1.124
People have enough water containers of the appropriate size	4.25	18.75	2.5	69	5.5	3.53	0.996
We have an alternative source of water	6	17	3	65	9	3.54	1.064
Refugees have access to info on hygiene and sanitation	0	4.5	3.25	84.25	8	3.96	0.54
Refugees have waste management/disposal facilities	0.5	10.25	4.75	79.5	5	3.78	0.712
Each household has access to a well-conditioned toilet	1.75	38.25	4.75	51.25	4	3.18	1.047
Each household has access to a well-conditioned bathroom	4	37	7.25	46.25	5.5	3.12	1.096
No negative beliefs or practices on WASH	1.25	8	5.25	76.25	9.25	3.84	0.744
Refugees get info on the safe water chain	0.25	2.75	3	83.25	10.75	4.02	0.52
Refugees get info on waste disposal	0.5	4.75	5.5	80.25	9	3.93	0.613
Refugees are involved in the management of the water system	0.5	2	5.25	74.75	17.5	4.07	0.591
Regular assessments are conducted on WASH	0	4	11.5	78.25	6.25	3.87	0.566
Aggregate mean and standard deviation						3.716	0.8144

Table 4 reveals the findings that refugee involvement in the management of water systems, refugees' access to information on the safe water chain, the water refugees obtain is safe and clean and refugees have access to information on water and sanitation are the areas with highest level of agreement among study participants on access to WASH.

The findings from the quantitative study conform to the qualitative findings, elaborating increased involvement of the refugee and host communities in the planning and management of water and sanitation facilities. This is being carried out through several structures established, including the water user committees, the village health teams, refugee welfare committees and other formal and informal groups within the refugee population. WMU's wash technical expert observed that "These community structures are the first line of engagement for humanitarian partners and provide a link between humanitarian actors and the refugee population". While there is a clear division of roles between different groups, they operate coherently to ensure that the contribution of one group supports the other.

When communities actively participate in planning, implementing, and maintaining water and sanitation projects, they develop a sense of ownership. This ownership increases the likelihood that projects will be maintained over the long term, ensuring sustainability beyond initial implementation. This is crucial, especially with declining resources, as noted above. Beneficiaries are known for the invaluable knowledge concerning water sources, sanitation practices, and cultural preferences. Their involvement will guarantee that interventions are tailored to local needs and conditions, leading to increased effectiveness and cultural appropriateness in managing water and sanitation programs.

The above findings support existing literature on the role of community systems in enhancing refugees' access to water and sanitation services. A study by Bolin and Stanford revealed that active participation in managing essential resources like water can significantly empower refugees, allowing them to have a say in decisions that affect their daily lives. This involvement can enhance their sense of agency and integration within the settlement (Bolin & Stanford, 1998). Community involvement in resource management often leads to more sustainable and effective outcomes. Involving refugees in the management of water systems may improve the efficiency of these systems and ensure that the solutions implemented are more attuned to the community's actual needs. Similarly, where there is a consensus on the role of refugees in managing resources, it can reflect effective community-based management structures and a well-integrated approach to involving refugees in essential services. Valcourt et al. (2020) emphasised that involving refugees in managing natural resources improves both the sustainability of these resources and the social cohesion within communities. However, this involvement must be carefully managed to mitigate the potential conflicts that may arise within the refugee populations and between refugees and communities hosting them (Gumisiriza, 2018).

Conversely, water availability for short- and long-term needs for refugees was noted to have the lowest level of agreement, implying refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi had minimal agreement on access to water for both short- and long-term needs. However, the high standard deviation may indicate that in some pockets of the settlements, refugees have access to water in the short and long term, while in other areas, it may not be the case.

The findings above are consistent with the findings from the qualitative study. As observed by the lead technical officer for Water Mission in Uganda, "Access to water remains one of the critical needs for refugees as it is directly linked to the health and well-being of affected populations. Considering the diverse needs of the refugee population, the focus of the humanitarian organisations is to deliver water for domestic use as they cannot deliver water for production". The same was opined by UNHCR's WASH technical lead in Arua who noted that the "The strategic objective of UNHCR is to ensure each refugee can access at least 20 litres of water per day in a safe, cheaper and sustainable manner". Resultantly, humanitarian partners invested in motorised water systems that rely on solar energy and extended to the community through a pipeline. These systems are augmented with hand pumps, which act as a backup system in situations of system breakdown.

Access to health care by refugees

Table 5 provides the study findings on access to health care by refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements. The study examined how much refugees can access these services and what quality

standards are being observed. Respondents' views were rated on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating the strongest level of agreement among participants. The findings of the analysis are provided below.

Table 5

Study findings on access to health care

Refugee access to healthcare	SDA F (%)	DA (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std Deviation
I can access a health facility within 1 1-hour walk from home	12	25	1.5	48.5	13	3.26	1.294
I make 1-4 visits to a health facility per year	11.5	19.2	2.3	57.8	9.5	3.34	1.22
A clinician attends to 50 people per day	10.7	21.7	4	49	14.5	3.35	1.265
I wait for 30 minutes or less before seeing a clinician	12	30.2	1.3	45.7	10.8	3.13	1.287
The nearest health center is no more than 5 km	12.3	26.7	2	45.8	0	3.21	1.304
There is an ambulance for referrals	0.25	1.5	0.75	59.25	38.25	4.34	0.6
There is a presence of community-based health workers	0	1	1	85.8	12.2	4.09	0.374
The community health workers are trained	0.2	0.5	0.5	89	9.8	4.08	0.374
Community health workers engage us in health programs	0	0.5	2.3	83	14.2	4.11	0.416
There is a system for referral	0	0.2	1.7	72.3	25.8	4.24	0.48
The community is engaged in the design of health programs	0.2	7.7	3.8	77.7	10.5	3.91	0.683
There is a supply of essential drugs	10.8	21.8	6	52.7	8.7	3.27	1.207
Every admitted patient has access to a bed	5.2	10.7	6.8	66.3	11	3.67	0.987
Health staff have the required knowledge	0.8	0.8	1	85.7	11.7	4.07	0.47
Refugees have access to health info	0.3	2.2	2.3	86.2	9	4.02	0.475
Partners conduct at least 1 assessment per year on health	1	4	7.5	76	11.5	3.93	0.66
Pregnant women access ANC within the first 3 months of pregnancy	1.5	2.8	1	70	24.7	4.14	0.696
A trained health worker attends all births	0	0.3	0.7	76	23	4.22	0.448
All children receive the required immunization before 1 1/2 years	0	0	0.3	63.7	36	4.36	0.485
There is a health unit management committee at our nearest facility	0.3	5	2.5	78.2	14	4.01	0.623
The health unit management committee is trained	0	4	2.5	80.3	13.3	4.03	0.564
Aggregate mean and standard deviation						3.85	0.918

Table 5 indicates that presence of ambulance for referrals, presence of community-based health workers, training of community workers on their roles and responsibilities, community health workers engage refugees on health programs, a system for health referrals, health staff have the required knowledge and skills and refugees have access to health information are the areas with highest agreement under access to health care. The high mean and low standard deviation imply that refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi have increased access to health care.

The results from the quantitative study conformed with those from the qualitative study. During an interview with UNHCR's health expert, he noted that delivering health care for refugees aligns with the National health delivery system. He noted that:

“While there are different humanitarian partners supporting access to health care for refugees, the delivery of health care is in line with the Ministry of Health (MoH) guidelines and standards. At the strategic level, UNHCR, OPM and NGOs offering health care, and the Ministry of Health have developed the health response plan that guides the alignment of the health care in the refugee system with that at the national level.”

This approach aims to ensure effectiveness and coherence in health care delivery. An official from the OPM further noted that they have a strategic focus on ensuring equal access to health care for refugees and the communities that host them. He said, “Humanitarian partners have immensely improved the delivery of health care in the refugee settlement and the surrounding host community through support to infrastructure development, consistent supply of medicine and other medical supplies and continuous recruitment and development of health care workers.”

The above findings indicate increased emphasis on strengthening the role of community-based structures in health care management. This approach and the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative studies tend to support existing literature on access to health care for refugees. A mean score of 4.34 signifies that refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi perceive that ambulance services are readily accessible. This reflects a strong level of satisfaction and indicates that the infrastructure for emergency medical services is well-established in these settlements. Globally, access to emergency medical services is often challenging in refugee settings due to logistical constraints and the high demand for healthcare (Nawrotzki & DeWaard, 2018). The high mean score in Rhinocamp and Imvepi suggests the impact of health care systems in improving access to health care for refugees. WHO (2021) highlighted the importance of efficient emergency medical services in addressing acute health needs in refugee populations.

The positive perceptions on the presence and training of community-based health workers (mean scores of 4.09 and 4.08, respectively) highlight the relevant presence of community health workers and the additional impact of training and capacity-building programs in enhancing access to community health. The same was highlighted during the KII. Spencer and Charsley (2021) further note that community health workers are crucial in providing accessible care and health education in refugee settings. This could explain why findings on health community engagement in health care programs and community access to health information registered high levels of agreement (mean of 4.11 and 4.02, respectively). This observation is further consistent, who emphasized the impact of community engagement and information dissemination on health literacy and outcomes.

It can be observed, however, that conditions related to physical access registered the lowest level of agreement. These included waiting time, time spent from home to the nearest health facility being less than one hour, and the distance to the health center being less than one hour. The average mean on the 3 elements was 3,2 while the average standard deviation was 1.295, which is regarded as high. The low mean implies that refugees in Rhinocamp face serious challenges in accessing health facilities in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements. The high standard deviation implies that some sections of the settlement have increased physical access while others have limited physical access.

The above findings conform to the findings from the qualitative study. For instance, UNHCR’s Public health officer noted that access to health care remains challenging for refugees and nationals. “Despite those standards being set by the Ministry of Health, it has not been achieved by both refugees and host communities because of the geographical dispersion of the settlements, increased population pressure due to the additional numbers occasioned by the refugee influx and declining funding to refugee programs”. Indeed, dependence on donor funding has been the main factor impeding access to health care for refugees, as these funds are unpredictable and sometimes earmarked for specific interventions that may not tackle the intended goals. This aligns with prior studies highlighting the implications of relying on donor funding to finance refugee health programs (Nawrotzki & DeWaard, 2018). While there were efforts, as highlighted in the qualitative study, to integrate refugee health into National health care provision as a strategic and sustainable solution to the funding problem, the ability of national systems to accept additional systems remains a challenge, especially in developing countries where health financing is still a problem.

The above findings corroborate the published health sector performance reports released by UNHCR in Uganda. According to the year-end reporting of the health sector in 2023, the consultation

The clinician ratio was an average of 46 persons per clinician against the standard of 50 persons per clinician per day. By the end of 2023, the health sector was able to raise 42.8% (45 million dollars) of the required 105 million dollars to fund the health sector budget. Despite this, the health outcomes remained within targets. The under-five and crude mortality rates were kept low at 0.13 and 0.05 per 1000 per month, respectively (standard is below 1.5 and 0.75 deaths per 1000 per month). The leading causes of mortality are Malaria (16%), Neonatal deaths (13%), Lower respiratory tract infection (12%), Anemia (6%) and Liver diseases (6%) among the general population.

Refugee access to livelihood and employment opportunities (RAEO)

Table 6 provides the study findings on refugees' access to livelihood and employment opportunities. The study examined how much refugees can access these services and what quality standards are being observed. Respondents' views were rated on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating the strongest level of agreement among participants. The findings of the analysis are provided here.

Table 6

Study findings on access to livelihood and employment opportunities

Areas of livelihood support	SDA (%)	DA (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std Deviation
I have the required skills to get a job or engage in IGA	2	9.25	4.75	68.75	15.25	3.86	0.856
I have a job that meets my household needs	11	38.25	13.25	32.25	5.25	2.83	1.152
Refugees and HC get equal pay for equal work	6.25	25.75	10.25	47.75	10	3.3	1.141
I have access to land for production	7.25	22	8.25	57.75	4.75	3.31	1.089
I have access to capital to engage in production	7.75	25.5	7.5	54.5	4.75	3.23	1.118
I have access to information on jobs/employment	5	27	17.75	45.5	4.75	3.18	1.042
I have the freedom to start a business	0.75	5.75	4.75	61.5	27.25	4.09	0.782
I have access to banking/financial services in COA	7	20.25	11.25	56.5	5	3.32	1.071
I have access to land for farming or business	9	24.5	4.25	58.25	4	3.24	1.138
I am planning to start a business or look for a job in COA	6.75	11.25	10.5	55.25	16.25	3.63	1.091
Aggregate mean and standard deviation						3.38	1.05

Table 6 presents the findings that refugees in Uganda have the freedom to start a business, they have the required skills to start a business, and the majority are planning to start a business or looking for a job in the country of asylum. These are elements linked to the policy environment on economic engagement. The high mean implies that refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi are free to start a business, have the required skills to start a business or engage in livelihood activities and are planning to start business enterprises. The low standard deviation implies a low variability of the respondents' views on those items.

The above findings conform to the findings from the qualitative study, which highlighted the significance of Uganda's open-door policy that allows refugees the freedom to start a business and reside in any part of the country. This view was exemplified by OPM's Community Services Officer in Rhinocamp refugee settlement, who noted that:

Uganda has a robust and progressive refugee policy anchored on the Refugee Act 2006. Under the Act, refugees are given freedom to engage in economic activities without the restrictions imposed on foreign nationals or aliens, like work permits, capital limitations or business classification.

Several studies have exemplified the role of skills development and a conducive environment in enabling refugee livelihoods to thrive. Skills development is crucial for successful entrepreneurship, enabling refugees to navigate business challenges, innovate, and manage resources effectively (UNHCR, 2021). Refugees with the requisite skills are better equipped to launch and sustain enterprises, leading to financial autonomy and improved economic stability. This not only helps reduce their dependence on relief aid but also encourages independence and empowerment of individuals (Tibaingana et al., 2022). A study by Jacobsen (2002) further noted that willingness to start a business reflects refugees' readiness to seize opportunities for economic participation and adaptability in the face of displacement. This is a prerequisite for enhancing their economic prospects and facilitating smoother integration into the host society by aligning with local market needs and contributing to economic growth (Clemens et al, 2018). Stites et al. (2021) emphasised that Uganda can enhance access to employment opportunities by inculcating a mindset of innovation that transitions refugees from aid receivers to active contributors in society.

Conversely, the study highlighted key challenges affecting refugee employment, including a lack of jobs, information regarding employment opportunities, a lack of capital to start a business and limited land for agricultural production. These were funded in conformity with the qualitative study that highlighted the impact of non-policy barriers in enhancing refugee employment. A study revealed that the employment challenges faced by young refugee men and women are characterised by significant gender disparities, exacerbated by cultural norms, discrimination, and systemic barriers, including differences in local support programs, traditional attitudes towards women working, or the availability of suitable job opportunities. These gendered dynamics and regional variations further illustrate the complex landscape of employment and livelihood among refugee communities.

These challenges are compounded because Refugee Hosting Countries, many of which are Low- and Middle-Income Countries, face substantial socio-economic and demographic challenges, including unemployment, lack of basic services and poor infrastructure to implement sustainable solutions for refugees, resulting in inadequate access to livelihood and employment opportunities for displaced populations and host communities (Stites et al., 2021). However, within these resource constraints and insufficient infrastructure, refugee-hosting countries have adopted humanitarian-focused refugee integration strategies that seek to leverage the capacities of refugee populations and humanitarian organisations to create sustainable livelihoods, the results of which have been impressive.

Participants in the KII noted that since most refugees are residents in rural areas, their major economic activity is farm-based agriculture, which relies heavily on land. The OPM community services officer, I Imvepi, noted that "land remains a big challenge for refugees. The land offered by the government is 30*30 metres, which cannot support large-scale farming". Participants during the FGD further highlighted critical challenges affecting access to livelihood and employment opportunities, including limited employment opportunities, lack of market for agricultural production, shortage of water for production, especially during the dry season and lack of skills among the young population. This, coupled with other systemic challenges, affects the ability of refugees to access livelihood and employment opportunities. Studies have consistently shown that refugees often encounter significant barriers to accessing adequate employment, affecting their livelihood. Established that refugees struggle with precarious employment conditions and high unemployment rates, severely impacting their ability to meet basic household needs. The implications of these employment barriers are profound, as inadequate job opportunities hinder refugees' economic stability, self-sufficiency, and integration into host communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence on aid (UNHCR, 2022). Addressing these barriers is crucial for improving refugees' livelihoods and fostering economic integration into new societies.

Discussion

Findings show that the regression model was statistically significant ($F(1, 397) = 81.585, p < 0.001$), indicating that the formal support system explained a significant portion of the variance in access to socio-economic rights. The regression analysis provided strong evidence supporting the hypothesis that a formal support system is significantly related to access to socioeconomic rights. The model explained that a significant relationship between a formal support system and access to socio-economic rights was statistically significant. These findings suggest that a formal support system may be an important predictor of access to socioeconomic rights for refugees in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements.

Additionally, this study established a strong formal social support system among refugees, with a mean of 4.0. The study further established a relatively high level of access to socio-economic rights among refugees, with a mean score of 3.7, the highest in health care, water and sanitation services.

Several studies have highlighted the significance of formal social support systems on access to socio-economic rights. For instance, access to formal support systems was positively associated with various indicators of socio-economic well-being, including employment, education, and housing stability. Similarly, consistent evidence suggests that access to formal support systems greatly contributes to increased refugee access to social and economic services. As alluded to by Heidinger (2023). A sustainable access to such formal support mechanisms enhances the ability of refugees to overcome barriers while integrating into unfamiliar grounds and navigate challenges related to language proficiency, employment, and social networks, which are crucial elements in access to socio-economic rights. Jacobsen (2002) emphasised that effective government policies and services are essential for facilitating refugees' integration into host societies by promoting access to necessary resources and services. Found that supportive government frameworks significantly impact refugees' ability to achieve economic stability and self-sufficiency. Strohmeier et al. (2025) also noted that government responsiveness and accountability, including mechanisms for refugees to voice complaints and address grievances, are crucial for maintaining trust and ensuring effective service delivery. However, Jacobsen (2002) observed that such support is always limited in refugee situations due to a lack of financial resources, political will and shifting political priorities of hosting governments.

Conducted a similar study examining the role of support services in refugee resettlement including structured programs and services provided by government agencies, non-profit organisations, and community groups specifically designed to assist refugees in refugee settlements and found that access to formal social support systems was positively associated with various indicators of socio-economic well-being, including employment, education, and housing stability. Similarly, also found consistent evidence suggesting that access to formal social support services, such as language classes, job training, and mental health counselling, significantly contributes to refugees' socio-economic well-being and overall integration outcomes.

Heidinger (2023) argued that sustained access to formal social support systems is crucial for refugees to overcome barriers to integration and navigate challenges related to language proficiency, employment, and social networks, which are crucial elements in access to socioeconomic rights. Their findings corroborated the findings of Haugseth et al. (2024) who in examining the role of Community Organizations and formal social support systems underscored the complementary role of formal social support systems and grassroots initiatives in addressing the diverse needs of refugee populations and fostering social inclusion that are crucial in enhancing accessing to socio economic rights.

The role of formal social support systems in refugees' access to socio-economic rights was further emphasised by Ager and Strang (2008). In their study, "Enhancing Social Support Networks for Refugee Women: A Qualitative Exploration," the authors explored the significance of social support networks for refugee women's well-being and integration experiences. Their findings highlight the interconnectedness between formal social support systems, such as government agencies and NGOs,

and informal social support networks in shaping refugees' sense of belonging and resilience. Additionally, in examining the effectiveness of school-based support services in promoting the academic achievement and psychosocial well-being of refugee youth, further underscored the pivotal role of formal educational institutions in providing targeted interventions and resources to support the integration and success of refugee students.

Access to socio-economic rights is fundamental for refugees' dignity and integration. In Uganda, refugees benefit from the right to work, own land, and access public services. This inclusive approach has facilitated refugees' participation in the local economy and society (Tulibaleka, 2022). However, challenges remain in fully realising these rights. A significant barrier is the lack of awareness among refugees and host communities about the rights and services available. The UNHCR (2023) reports that only 45% of refugees live in countries with unrestricted access to formal employment, indicating gaps in implementation and awareness. Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles and restrictive policies can impede refugees' access to employment and social services. In Uganda, despite legal entitlements, refugees often face delays in obtaining work permits, and employers may be unaware of refugees' right to work, limiting job opportunities. This is compounded by limited access to financial services as refugees encounter difficulties opening bank accounts and accessing credit due to their uncertain legal status and lack of documentation. This financial exclusion hinders their ability to invest in businesses, education, and other opportunities essential for socio-economic advancement.

Despite the above findings, some studies indicated that formal support systems do not necessarily translate into improved refugee access to socio-economic rights. Formal support systems often fail to translate into increased access to socio-economic rights due to bureaucratic barriers and institutional inefficiencies. In many low- and middle-income countries, access to state-sponsored welfare is conditioned by stringent eligibility criteria or cumbersome documentation requirements that disproportionately exclude marginalised populations. A study by Bukuluki and Mubiru (2014) revealed that political factors such as elite attitudes and lack of genuine knowledge among stakeholders have previously obstructed the implementation of social protection programs, including the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment initiative. These challenges highlight that the mere existence of formal support systems does not guarantee effective delivery or equitable access to socio-economic rights.

Similarly, Heidinger (2023) observed that the incoherence between formal support and program implementation may undermine the efficacy of support systems in realising socio-economic rights. This suggests that the capacity and political will to enforce rights equitably are critical, as formal systems alone may not adequately address the needs of all citizens. Arguably, an overreliance on formal systems often marginalises informal or community-based mechanisms that can be more accessible and culturally resonant for disadvantaged groups. In informal settlements, residents frequently prefer informal actors and networks due to their accessibility and efficiency, as formal actors may be perceived as less responsive or absent. The systems theory, which formed the theoretical basis for this study, hypothesised formal support systems as components within the broader socio-economic system that interact with other elements, such as enabling refugees' smooth access to socio-economic rights. The findings from this study emphasised the significant role that formal support systems play in facilitating access to rights, which is in line with social systems thinking (Heidinger, 2023). From the perspective of social network theory, which formed part of the study's theoretical framework, it is observed that refugees rely on network support to enable increased access to socio-economic rights, which is in line with the findings from this study. This thinking supports the idea that social capital and social ties, provided by formal support structures, can significantly impact refugees' socio-economic outcomes (Portes, 1998).

Despite the robust methodology employed, this study was limited in some respects, thus affecting the general applicability of its findings in all refugee settings. Firstly, the study was conducted in a rural refugee setting whose realities of support systems greatly vary from those in either urban or camp settings. Secondly, the study viewed socio-economic rights from the four dimensions of education,

healthcare, water and sanitation and employment opportunities, leaving aside a range of other socio-economic rights that could be of interest. Thirdly, the concurrent but separate collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data posed a risk of limited integration between the two datasets. Fourthly, although structured questionnaires ensured consistency in data collection, they potentially restricted participants from elaborating on their responses, particularly among non-literate participants. Finally, logistical and language challenges in the refugee settlements were seen as a limitation. While the use of interpreters helped to address this, the overall outcome depended on the quality of the interpreters to understand the research questions and contextualise them to the respondents. However, these were cautiously addressed throughout the research process, including using recognised translators or translation tools prior to the engagement of the data collection team, thorough training of research assistants on the methodological tools and clarity on the content scope of the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study revealed a robust formal support system in Rhinocamp and Imvepi refugee settlements, and a high level of access to socio-economic rights for refugees. Additionally, the study found a statistically significant positive relationship between the presence of formal support systems and refugees' access to socio-economic rights. These findings provide useful insights into understanding the interplay between formal social support systems and refugee access to socio-economic rights. The finding underscores the importance of structured support from government agencies, NGOs, and community organisations in enhancing access to essential social and economic rights. The study's results align with existing research and theoretical framework, including the social systems theory and the social network theory, which highlights the positive impact of formal support systems on various aspects of refugee integration, including employment, education, and housing stability. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on refugee integration and rights protection by highlighting the critical role of formal support systems in facilitating access to socio-economic rights. By building upon existing knowledge and theoretical frameworks, the study creates more inclusive and supportive environments for refugees to thrive in their new host communities.

Recommendations of the study

The findings have significant implications for refugee policy. They suggest that strengthening formal support systems can substantially enhance refugees' access to socio-economic rights, including employment, education, and housing. The study advocates for policies that improve the coordination and investment in support services provided by government agencies, NGOs, and community groups. Critiquing systems theory's limitations also calls for policies that address structural inequalities and incorporate refugee voices into policy design.

In terms of practical strategies, the study emphasises that while formal support systems are crucial, they may not fully address all refugee needs. Future strategies should focus on enhancing the inclusivity and responsiveness of support systems to diverse refugee needs, including legal aid, language training, job skills development, and mental health support. Furthermore, the study suggests adopting participatory approaches that involve refugees in advocacy and system design, which could lead to more effective and equitable support mechanisms.

Suggestions for Future Research

Social support systems in urban settings, considering the uniqueness of support mechanisms in urban areas compared to rural settlements. While systems theory provides a useful framework for understanding the interconnectedness of support systems and rights access, it may overlook power dynamics and structural inequalities inherent in these systems. Future research should explore how broader socio-political factors shape the functioning and effectiveness of both formal and informal social support systems in supporting refugee populations.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this manuscript declare the following:

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2. Author Duuki Richard is employed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees which could be perceived as a potential conflict of interest. However, the office has cleared the author to undertake this study at a personal level.
3. The authors declare no other conflicts of interest related to this manuscript.

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