



Refugees' Access and Barriers to Education at Bidibidi Settlement in Uganda

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East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences

Abstract

This study investigated access and barriers to education for refugees in Swinga in Bidibidi settlement, Yumbe District in Uganda. Locations of the study were specific village one to eleven and cluster one to three within Swinga, in zone 2 of Bidibidi settlement. The study unearthed how the refugees in Swinga Zone 2 struggled to access education to achieve livelihood outcomes. It particularly explored factors that inhibits refugees' access to education that in turn affects livelihood outcomes. The study used the purposive sampling strategy to draw a sample from the refugee sites. Data was collected through structured interviews, focus group discussions and observational techniques. The analysis of data involved the identification of commonly recurring phrases. Based on the findings, the study concluded that many refugee children missed education opportunities. The barriers include low capacity of staff in primary schools, shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate facilities and high educational costs. The study presents an urgent need to construct durable facilities that enhance the quality of education. The study further recommends the establishment of School Management Committees and involvement of faith-based organizations to promote the sense of ownership and accountability among the refugee communities, thereby ensuring effective management and operation of the educational facilities. Finally, regular inspections and feedback mechanisms are essential for enhanced services.

Keywords: Uganda; refugees, Bidibidi settlement; education assets; education outcomes.

How to cite: Odongo, B. D., Neema, S. and Odongoh, S. A. (2025). Refugees' Access and Barriers to Education at Bidibidi Settlement in Uganda. *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 6(3), 55-63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2025v06i03.0446>.

Introduction

In recent years, one of the most pressing challenges confronting the international community is the new wave of refugees influx (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018 UNHCR, 2021;

World Bank, 2023; 2024a, 2024b). Recently documented studies by UNHCR and World Bank report a significant rise in the number of forcibly displaced individuals worldwide, currently at 70.8 million, including 25.9 million,

that is 1% of the global population classified as refugees (UNHCR, 2024a; World Bank, 2024a, 2024b).

Still then, regional distribution show that Sub-Saharan Africa predominantly hosts the highest number of refugees UNHCR 2023a, 2023b, 2023d). A report by the UNHCR Uganda as a strategic location for hosting refugees (UNHCR, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024e; 2024f). The World Bank re affirms Uganda has a friendly policy that accepts refugees from neighboring countries, especially those experiencing human rights violations, political instability, civil wars and armed conflicts (World Bank, 2023, 2024a, 2024b)..

By mid 2025, according to The Government of Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the registered refugee and asylum seeker population in Uganda stood at 1,936,934 persons (1,898,338 refugees and 38,596 asylum seekers). South Sudanese make up the largest refugee population in Uganda (1,019,243), followed by refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (632,833), Sudan (88,427), Eritrea (57,938) and Somalia (50,354), Burundi (45,410), Rwanda (24,829) Ethiopia (15,865) and others (2,035) (UNHCR, 2025). This positioned Uganda among the top five refugee destinations for individuals from 33 nations globally (World Bank, 2023; 2024a, 2024b). According to UNHCR (2025), Uganda's refugees and asylum seekers are across 13 districts and 31 designated settlements. These includes Rhino Camp (Madi-Okollo & Terego), Imvepi (Terego), Lobule (Koboko), Bidibidi (Yumbe), Palorinya (Obongi), Adjumani (Adjumani), Palabek (Lamwo), Kiryandongo (Kiryandongo), Kyangwali (Kikuube), Kyaka II (Kyegegwa), Rwamwanja (Kamwenge), Nakivale (Isingiro) and Oruchinga (Isingiro), in addition to urban refugees residing in Kampala (UNHCR, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Despite favourable legal and policy regulatory framework for education of refugees, young and child refugees, in particular, encounter considerable barriers to education, due to discrimination, poverty and increased vulnerability (Government of Uganda, 2024a, 2024b, UNHCR, 2022a).

Refugee Education Legal and Policy Framework

In trying to understand the refugees' access to education outcomes, it is important to review

the legal framework within which the refugee education operates. Langford (2013) specifies these legal frameworks for the treatment and management of refugees to be threefold, stemming from the international, regional and domestic level. According to Article 1(a) of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 Organization of African Unity (1969) Convention, a refugee is:

A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for a fear of persecution (UNHCR, 1951).

Article 29 and 32 of the Uganda Refugees Act 2006 established the rights of refugees in Uganda, providing for "education, other than elementary education for which refugees must receive the same treatment as nationals, and in particular regarding access to particular studies, the recognition of foreign certificates, diplomas and degrees and the remission of fees and charges" (Government of Uganda, 2006, 2010; Government of Uganda, 2024a). In addition, there are international and regional legal frameworks that protect refugees across the globe (UNHCR, 1951). Moreover, it is applicable to all states that have ratified the 1951 UN Convention and its subsequent protocols established in 1969 (Rutinwa, 2002; Gonzaga, 2003; Sharpe, 2018; Ahimbisibwe, 2020; Widmann, 2021).

The African Convention includes specific provisions aimed at safeguarding the rights of refugees, including that of accessing education (Langford, 2013; Kemigisa et al. 2022). In Uganda, various national laws informed by regional and international legal standards, protect refugees (UK Aid and U-Learn, 2023). These laws empower the refugees' access to education as human capital that facilitate activities aimed at improving their livelihoods (Goodwin-Gill, 2014). The rights to education for refugees are enshrined in the 2006 Refugee Act, CAP 26 and the 2010 Refugee Regulations (Government of Uganda, 2006, 2010; Sharpe, 2018). The Refugee Act, officially enacted in 2009, along with the 2010 Regulations, aligns with international standards for refugee protection as outlined in the global legal

instruments (Ssejjemba, 2018; Kemigisa et al. 2022). These laws and regulations promote access to human capital resources, especially education among refugees, clearly supporting a humanitarian-development approach to refugee assistance (Sharpe and Namusoby, 2012).

Access to Education

As already mentioned, refugee initiatives are based on various national, regional and international obligations that shape numerous government policies, plans and frameworks (Widmann, 2021). The Education Response Plan II (ERP II) for refugees and host communities enhances collaboration and efforts aimed at delivering quality education for refugees and those hosting them (UNHCR 2023e). This initiative aligns with the objectives outlined in the Education and Sports Strategic Plan (ESSP) for the fiscal years 2020/21 to 2024/25 and is included as an annex to the ESSP (Government of Uganda, 2024a, 2024b). Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) facilitates the link between humanitarian and development actors and activities, including access to education as human livelihood asset (UNHCR, 2017).

ERP II, anchored in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, emphasizes equitable quality education for both refugees and host communities. This represents a vital aspect of human capital that is crucial for ensuring better livelihoods for refugees as well as host communities (Government of Uganda, 2024a, 2024b); Sempebwao, 2023). It encompasses skills, knowledge, health and physical abilities that are crucial for implementing various livelihood strategies (Ashong & Smith, 2001). In the ERP II, the development of human capital are achieved through education, training and engagement and promoting lifelong learning opportunities (Government of Uganda, 2024b). This is reinforced by Allison (2025), who notes that individuals' capabilities are recognized when they can contribute effectively to a productive labour force and this can be attained through acquiring education. A deficiency in robust access to education restricts an individual's potential to earn a higher income (Sackey, 2005). Furthermore, the ability to invest in education enhances one's prospects for improved future earnings (Woodhall, 1995; Sempebwao, 2023). Scoones (1998) further

emphasizes that investing in human capital especially education leads to the acquisition of skills, knowledge, labour capacity and good health, all of which are vital for successfully pursuing diverse livelihood strategies (Scoones, 1998). Human capital, especially education, is intrinsically connected to other forms of capital; for instance, obtaining a better education can facilitate access to social, natural and financial capital (Sen, 1997).

Swinga and Bidibidi Settlement Context

In line with the Education Response Plan (ERP II) for refugees and host communities, it is reported that investments in education among refugees in Swinga, Zone 2, have been notably low, with only a few school going children and youth benefiting from the few opportunities (Sempebwao, 2023; Government of Uganda, 2025). Various humanitarian organizations, including United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Windle International Uganda, Save the Children Uganda, Plan International and Yumbe District Local Government provides and support the education of refugees at all level. These actors actively worked to enhance educational opportunities for refugee children and youth in Swinga and the broader Bidibidi area (UNHCR, 2022). Many of the refugees in Swinga, Zone 2 have less access to educational services and other opportunities for human capital investment. The absence of education and vocational training institutions limits opportunities for children who are unable to continue to secondary or tertiary education, which significantly affects their future employment prospects (Government of Uganda, 2025). Furthermore, the access to quality education for refugees residing in Swinga, in Bidibidi settlement, is severely constrained due to lack of schools, classrooms and teachers.

Therefore, this study sought to unearth how the refugees in Swinga access education to achieve livelihood outcomes. Secondly, to explore factors that influence or inhibits refugees' access to education that in turn shape livelihood outcomes for refugees living in Swinga Zone 2, Bidibidi settlements. Finally, the study sought to make relevant recommendations based on findings.

The study was confined to specific villages one to eleven and clusters one to three within Swinga, in Bidibidi settlement, Yumbe District. Specifically, Swinga was chosen due to its distinctive features as a host for refugees with stable population. This zone is closed to new arrivals. The study specifically focused on Swinga, which continues to accommodate refugees' majority from South Sudan and other nationalities, notably the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Sudan and Somalia. Furthermore, Swinga Zone 2 is 8 km from Yumbe town and its proximity is near trading centres; the South Sudan border adds a complex dimension to understanding refugees' access to education from various perspectives (UNHCR, 2018; 2022).

Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework employed in the execution of the study. It details the steps taken to design, plan, and implement this research.

Design

This study employed a multifaceted data collection approach, utilizing a qualitative approach since examining access to education among refugees is complex and it requires the perspectives of various knowledgeable stakeholders, along with the collection and analysis of qualitative data from diverse sources.

Population and Sampling

The study population was 44,495 refugees within 7,503 households at Swinga, Zone 2 in Uganda (UNHCR, 2022b). Being a qualitative research, the study used the purposive sampling method to select a representative sample of 30 Key Informants (refugees) and 11 leaders. Additionally, six focus group discussions were conducted with refugee groups randomly selected from a list provided by the Refugee Welfare Committee (RWC). Out of the six focus group discussions, four were dedicated to women (two for young female refugees and two for older female refugees aged 25 and above) while two were for men (one for young male refugees and another for older male refugees aged 25 and above from villages 1-11).

Data Collection Instruments

Data was collected through structured interviews, focus group discussions and

observational techniques. A team of three trained and qualified Research Assistants from Yumbe District and conversant with the Yumbe district context participated in the data analysis process.

Statistical Treatment of Data

The analysis of data entailed the identification of commonly recurring phrases. The researcher coded each statement and subjected the data to analysis using both Nvivo and Atlas software version 26. Thematic coding was utilized to link and track the themes and concerns that emerged in connection with the different interview questions. Data analysis was divided into three stages: First stage, known as data reduction, involved a thorough review of the recorded information, with the aim of categorizing it into thematic areas to facilitate analysis. Secondly, the categorization of data into themes was crucial, as it streamlined the analysis, interpretation and presentation of the results. The third stage is known as interpretative, deriving meanings from the collected data and formulating conclusions based on the study's objectives. The analysis process continued until the data collected no longer revealed new insights.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained approval from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (MAKSS-REC 07.2023.684) on October 24, 2023. Subsequently, on January 5, 2024, the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology granted further approval (NSCT Ref: SS2114ES), which is essential for conducting social and scientific research in Uganda. The final official research permit and field clearance were issued by the Office of the Prime Minister Headquarters (Department of Refugees in Kampala, Ref. OPM/R/46) on January 31, 2024. A copy of the approved letter was submitted to the District Refugee Desk Officer (RDO Arua), and another copy was retained during field entry with the Refugee Desk Officer in Arua and the Camp Commandant at the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement on March 4, 2024. The researchers took measures to guarantee that participants gave their consent and willingly chose to engage in the interviews. Additionally, privacy and confidentiality were upheld during the data collection period.

Findings and Discussion

This section outlines the results of the study. The relevant literature enriched the discussions.

Theme 1: Access to Educations Services in Swinga, Bidibidi Settlement

In previous years, the Ugandan government, through the World Bank's Uganda Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers (UgIFT) program, allocated additional funds to local governments to enhance school staffing levels and infrastructure (World Bank, 2023; 2024a, 2024b). This initiative improved access to education in refugee-hosting districts, including Yumbe, ultimately Swinga Zone 2 benefiting the settlement level as well. Noting from past years and with confirmation from Settlement Commandant, significant progress were reported in addressing the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) at primary level for schools in Swinga Zone, Bidibidi settlement. However, conditions differ among the remaining five zone catchment areas that were not part of the study.

In principle, the education actors acknowledged that the overall, the influx of refugees has increased enrolment and intensified the strain on educational institutions at all levels, which were already grappling with inadequate infrastructure. For instance, refugees attested to the fact that the number of school-aged children in Swinga and other areas of the Bidibidi settlement in Yumbe district has more than doubled since the settlement's establishment in early 2016. According to UNHCR Education Partner Windle International, the pupil-classroom ratio (PCR) in Swinga, Zone 2 is currently 96:1. Although this represents an improvement from the 150:1 ratio recorded in the classroom gap analysis of November 2017, it is still not the best. Notable variations among the different clusters, specifically clusters one, two and three. Ultimately, enrolments at the existing educational institutions, including Alaba, Koro, Kejebere, Kodeje, Kenavally and Swinga Islamic Primary Schools for primary education, as well as Highland Primary School, Highland Secondary School and Seeds Secondary School for secondary education in Swinga Zone 2, continues to increase.

In many primary schools situated near refugee settlements in Swinga, and other zones of Bidibidi settlement, the population of refugee

students surpasses that of local learners, signifying greater access. As part of government policy, schools in Yumbe have embraced and integrated refugee children; another complex finding reveal hugged enrolment in pre-primary schools across Swinga. In all Clusters within Swinga, the higher pre-primary enrolment rates for refugees compared to nationals can be attributed to the role of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres. These centres serve as a vital platform for delivering suitable educational assistance to children aged 3 to 5 while also offering social services to young mothers and caregivers, many of whom are under 18 years of age.

The Education Act of 2008 and the Refugee Act of 2006 consolidate and simplify the existing legislation regarding the development and regulation of education and training, including refugees hosted in Uganda. It tackles additional related matters, providing guidelines are significant in improving access to and retention of learners across Uganda. In this respect therefore, the education working group in Swinga, recognizes that providing school meals plays a crucial role in attracting students to school, enhancing retention rates, increasing attendance, alleviating malnutrition and positively influencing the teaching and learning process.

Theme 2: Barrier to Access of Educations in Swinga, Bidibidi Settlement

The district education departments lack the necessary capacity and resources to accommodate the significant influx of students, particularly at the primary and Early Childhood Development (ECD) levels. The existing infrastructures are inadequate, with numerous schools depending on temporary facilities that are frequently in disrepair with bad shapes that present safety hazards for school pupils. The high pupil-to-classroom ratios and lack of adequate staff accommodations further exacerbate the learning environment, negatively affecting both staff well-being and students' participation. It was evident through observation that some schools feature semi-permanent classroom structures that are on the verge of collapse, likely built for temporary use and thus inadequate for the current pupils and student population in the study area.

The findings indicate significant difficulties in hiring teachers and other support personnel for government-operated schools in Swinga Zone 2. This situation is exacerbated by the ongoing complexities associated with educational transitions of the existing 15 primary and six secondary schools in Bidibidi settlement. Based on the data provided by the education partner and UNHCR, the overall pupil-to-teacher ratio (PTR) was 79:1. In Swinga, Zone 2, the PTR improved to 79:1 in 2020, a notable change from the Planning phase of ERP I in November 2017, when it was recorded at 94:1 (KII with OPM Settlement Commander).

Further, the current financial resource deficiencies in both wages and non-wage aspects, as well as shortcomings in governance and coordination, along with insufficient staffing standards. According to Refugee Welfare council leaders, these challenges not only hinder the recruitment process but also have wider repercussions for the delivery of educational services in the existing settlement of Yumbe.

The shortage of teachers adversely affects classroom management and hampers the provision of quality education for refugees residing in Bidibidi. Findings from key informant interviews (KII) further reinforce this noting a significant challenge in regards to a persistent shortage of teaching staff in the education sector, affecting both humanitarian and government schools, as well as Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres. The allocation of teachers to schools has not kept pace with the increasing number of refugees across the 11 villages.

A critical look of the payroll systems in two schools in Swinga uncovered significant salary disparity and huge difference between teachers funded by the government and those supported by humanitarian organizations. Teachers employed by UN agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations (HINGOs and NNGOs), as well as community-based organizations (CBOs), including those led by refugees typically earn higher salaries, which creates division in loyalty and hinders the delivery of quality education services. The Yumbe District District Education Officer (DEO) indicated that unless there is a harmonization of pay scales for both partner-funded and government-funded teachers, refugees would

continue to face significant challenges in obtaining quality education. This situation could further complicate the transition process and perpetuate reliance on external donor assistance. For Instance, According to the DEO, a teacher employed and paid by UNHCR and other Humanitarian NGOs take home an average of 1 million Uganda shillings while a counterpart in government schools takes half a million Uganda shillings.

Finding further revealed delays in hiring of teachers for government-run schools in the Bidibidi settlement, attributed primarily to bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient funding. This situation worsens the staffing shortages in both primary and secondary schools, particularly in high-enrolment areas, such as Swinga and the schools located in clusters 1-3. The protracted recruitment process for teachers and support staff adversely affects the quality of education, as schools remain understaffed for prolonged periods throughout the term.

High staff turnover rates across the existing schools in Swinga indicate that teachers frequently depart in search of better opportunities, which adversely affects access to education as well as the consistency and quality of instruction. In refugee settlements, the lack of incentives, such as hard-to-reach allowances further discourages teachers from remaining, thereby undermining the stability of educational access and the functioning of schools. The study found that restricted wage allocations limit the ability of both the government and Humanitarian Actors to employ the necessary number of teachers to ensure access to education. In areas with significant refugee populations, like Swinga, the existing wage allocations fall short of meeting the demand for educators, leading to overcrowded classrooms and elevated teacher-to-student ratios.

Findings from the field reveal access challenges and addressing the education of out-of-school children remains a significant challenge in the Swinga and Bidibidi refugee settlements. Many children discontinue their education or drop out of schools due to poor academic performance or negative experiences within the school environment. According to the Yumbe District Education Office, some parents fail to provide tuition fees or motivate their children to attend

school, often perceiving education as less important. Instead, they prefer their children to remain at home to assist with household activities or to seek employment that contributes to the family's financial needs. Additionally, Windle International (2025) has highlighted that girls who marry young or become pregnant are especially vulnerable to dropping out of school.

Research indicates that several primary schools, such as Alaba Primary School, Koro Primary School, Kejebere Primary School, Kodeje Primary School, Highland Primary School, Molondo Primary School and Swinga Islamic Primary School are already in process of transition to government system and receiving government support and oversights. However, this is not the same case with secondary schools. Findings reveal that Highland Secondary School and Romo Seeds Secondary School have not received the same level of attention, with only 50% designated for government oversight and support. Additionally, clusters 1-3 in Swinga Bidibidi lack any government-coded secondary schools, which hinders students' ability to advance to higher education and highlights a significant gap in educational access for refugees in the Bidibidi settlement. Several access gaps also exist in Vocational schools like Lokopio Technical School, Colonel Nasur Ezaruku Amin Memorial Technical Institute, Sinaloketa and Yoyo Youth Vocational Training and Recreational Centre in Bidibidi.

Access to schools and institutions with disputed ownership was a significant challenge in Swinga and other four zones bordering the Bidibidi settlements. Four schools and institutions in Swinga are community schools. However, some of these face ownership disputes, as founders seek to establish private ownership, which negatively affects the delivery of educational services and the morale of staff. This ambiguity surrounding ownership and land rights complicates access and jeopardizes the long-term viability of schools and institutions in Bidibidi. Additionally, there is a lack of reliable data concerning the status of schools in terms of infrastructure, human resources, financial resources, eligibility and the stages of transition to the government system. The Yumbe education situation analysis report indicates that several unlicensed schools, allegedly privately or community-owned, are operating in

Swinga. These institutions fail to comply with the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards (BRMS), particularly regarding the adequacy of infrastructure and the quality of teaching and learning.

Conclusions

The study concludes that while accessing quality education is not merely a fundamental human right but a vital tool for recovery during emergencies, many refugee children miss such opportunity. The study unearthed access to education for refugee children as a top priority in the study area. The barriers identified in the study area include low capacity of staff in primary schools, shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate facilities and high educational costs, among others. With the current decline in funding streams, the identified barriers are likely to increase if appropriate measures are not taken.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need to construct durable facilities to enhance quality education. These include classrooms, administrative facilities and housing for staff. These will accommodate the increasing enrolment demands and foster a safe and supportive learning environment. There is a need to establish School Management Committees and involvement of faith-based organizations to promote the sense of ownership and accountability among the refugee communities, thereby ensuring effective management and operation of educational facilities. Furthermore, the study recommends that innovative financing strategies be in place, including public-private partnerships, foundations as well as private sector involvement. Finally, regular inspections and feedback mechanisms are essential for enhanced services.

Acknowledgement

The Authors acknowledge the scholarship support offered by the Government of Ireland through the Embassy in Kampala and The Government of Uganda through the Makerere University Innovation Fund (MAK-RIF).

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