

## The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on refugees and host community's livelihoods in south western Uganda: a case of Nakivale refugee settlement

\*Mucungunzi Abel<sup>1</sup>, Mugisha Abbas<sup>1</sup> and Ahabwe Macklean<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Governance, Kabale University, Uganda

<sup>2</sup>Department of Humanities, Ibanda University

### ABSTRACT

This study examined the way the imposition of total lockdown during the Covid-19 epidemic affected the socio-economic livelihoods of refugees and host community's at Nakivale refugee settlement in South Western Uganda. This study worked towards answering the following questions; to what extent did Covid-19 affect refugees and host community's livelihood status at Nakivale refugee settlement?; how did Covid-19 affect the operations of government and other humanitarian stakeholders at Nakivale refugee settlement and how did they deal with such impact?; what alternative policy approaches were available to guide government and other actors in dealing with socio-economic livelihoods of refugees in pandemic events? By using a cross sectional design with a qualitative approach, the study used in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participatory mapping to explore the research questions. The study findings revealed that the imposition of country-wide lockdowns affected operations of all stakeholders which in turn also affected the socio-economic livelihoods of refugees and host communities. It was thus recommended that in future epidemic events, the government as the overall overseer of refugee situations in tandem with humanitarian agencies, would need to consider attending to the plight of refugees in totality with its response to the general citizenry.

\*Corresponding Author  
amucunguzi@kab.ac.ug

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### Introduction

Uganda has been host to refugees since the 1940s and it has received acclaim from other stakeholders in the humanitarian field for its relatively impressive performance in dealing with refugees livelihoods. With the onset of Covid-19, the operations of government and other agencies in the humanitarian field were adversely affected as was the case in other national and international development interventions. On 20th March, 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was identified in Uganda. Since that time, Uganda confirmed more than 90,910 Covid-19 cases and 2,412 deaths as of 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2021 (MOH, 2021). To slow the spread of the virus, Uganda like other countries across the globe made various efforts to suppress transmission of Covid-19 and to mitigate its socio-economic impacts on the populace. This unprecedented crisis unfolded in the context of many preexisting challenges, one of which was the domestic violence rooted from gendered dimensions of access to basic necessities in a world rife with gender inequality. The Covid-19 pandemic became the fastest moving global public health crisis

in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century causing significant mortality and morbidity and giving rise to health and social economic challenges to families (UNFPA, 2020).

Covid-19 increased poverty and vulnerabilities of refugees and host communities most especially women and girls who became susceptible to instances of sexual and gender based violence. As governments and partners responded to the crisis, it became apparent that more attention and resources were used to curtail the spread of the pandemic and maintenance of security. For instance in Uganda, a lot of attention was put on securing the borders and amassing resources to enforce state security at the expense of human socio-economic livelihoods security.

One of the measures adopted by the government to control the spread of Covid-19 included a country-wide total lockdown. The total lockdowns and subsequent partial lockdowns imposed in the country between March 2020 and February 2022 highly disrupted the economic activities of citizens as well as the refugees in refugee settlements. The nearly 1.4 million refugees and displaced people in Uganda faced an unimaginable emergency (IRC, 2020). Whereas the host communities around the refugee settlements stayed on their living quarters and close to their economic and social amenities and somehow coped fairly with the lockdown, the situation was different with refugees who were completely cut off from economic and social amenities which were existing outside the settlements.

This study was carried out in Nakivale Refugee Settlement which is found in Isingiro District in Southern Uganda. This refugee settlement which lies on the border with Tanzania is the third largest refugee settlement in Uganda and was hosting 135,388 refugees as of November 2020 (UNHCR, 2021).

## **Theoretical Review**

### **Sustainable livelihood approach**

The study was based on a sustainable livelihood framework for equitable living in the crisis of the Global pandemic (Emerson, 2021). This theory avers that in pandemic situations such as Covid-19, there is need to focus attention on deconstructing discourses pertaining to the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in a bid to minimize human vulnerabilities in the economy (Emerson, 2021). The SLF is a holistic approach that tries to capture and provide the means of understanding the fundamental causes and dimensions of a problem without collapsing the focus onto just a few factors. Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 (Sohrabi et al, 2020) and its impact raised a series of questions concerning human vulnerability, specifically risks to human health conditions, food security and income status. Therefore as per the SLF approach, any intervention against Covid-19 spread was required to pursue a holistic agenda in addressing the well-being of citizens and other persons within particular national boundaries across all areas of livelihoods.

## **Literature Review**

### **Covid-19 and Refugees Livelihoods**

The Concept of Covid-19

The Coronavirus disease erupted in 2019 and was otherwise commonly referred to as Covid-19. It is a communicable respiratory disease caused by a specific strain of coronavirus resulting in human illness

(UNICEF, 2021). The first known case of Covid-19 was identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The disease spread worldwide, leading to a global pandemic (Mckay, 2021). The disease became an unprecedented public health crisis that led to adverse local, national and international economic and social challenges.

The first case of COVID-19 within the East Africa region was reported in Kenya on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and the disease continued to spread in the region at a terrific speed. In Uganda, the first reported case of Covid-19 was recorded on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020 (MOH, 2020). Since then, the virus found its way into poor rural communities and urban neighborhoods in the whole country.

### **COVID-19 and Livelihoods**

As a result of the pandemic, the different types of community livelihoods were affected in various ways. People suffered from the sickness and limitation of movement, all of which affected people's livelihoods severely. As far as the refugees and the host communities were concerned, the pandemic affected their livelihoods in varying ways. The refugees had their hitherto lifestyles affected in many socio-economic dimensions, the significant of which included food, health and income dimensions. The World Food Program (WFP) estimated that 270 million people worldwide could have fallen into acute food insecurity at the end of 2020 (UNHCR, 2021). This was so because, the aid agencies had their budgets reduced due to the fact that their financiers resorted to redirecting resources from international engagements to domestic pandemic interventions in their countries of origin. This reality greatly affected the refugees' livelihoods since they were heavily dependent on such aid from humanitarian agencies. The refugees resorted to negative ways of coping with socio-economic disruptions by reducing meal times, selling of assets or cutting short their children's education (UNHCR, 2021). With incomes drying up and food systems disrupted by COVID-19, the scale and impact on food security and other socio-economic livelihoods was expected to increase in refugee settlements. As for the host communities, the covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns affected them as well.

Before the pandemic, the refugees and their host communities were enjoying a symbiotic relationship. The host communities could exchange their local food products with the food that the refugees were receiving from their donors. The relationship of both communities was further illustrated in form of labour from refugees and also in form of trading in food and other household items.

To slow the spread of the virus, Uganda imposed lockdown that hampered access to essential services and strained economic activities as it limited transportation of persons and goods, access to markets, health facilities, farming fields and education centres. The enforcement of these stringent measures disrupted people's way of life with significant ramifications on food security and the economy of persons (Kansiime et al., 2021). This was particularly true in Uganda that was already struggling with widespread poverty and malnutrition due to multiple political, economic and social shocks at the time. Mckibbin and Fernando (2020) opine that infectious diseases of a pandemic nature can affect households, governments and businesses in many ways such as increased business costs, increased public health care expenditure and changes in labour supply due to mortality and morbidity.

The local economy mostly the informal one depends greatly on the markets (Castro & Lozet, 2020). With the COVID-19 restrictions people were struggling both to maintain their livelihoods even in the

event of rising prices of essential goods and amenities. At the local level as the case is in Uganda due the decentralized system of public administration, the local authorities (districts, sub counties, parish and village local councils lacked accurate data regarding refugees and host communities. The refugees were not included in the various local and national censuses which made it very difficult for the central and local government authorities to plan and provide properly for citizens and refugees. As a result there was an increasing pressure on public services including health, food, employment and education facilities.

### **Covid-19 and other Stakeholder Interventions**

The refugee incidences across the world have attracted many forms of humanitarian assistance involving a host of stakeholders. These include host governments, aid agencies and civil society organisations. In most occasions, aid is often the important source of refugee livelihoods, providing in-kind and cash-based assistance that helps cover basic needs. Refugees typically do not have access to publicly provided services and support, and therefore they rely on self directed working or on humanitarian assistance to meet their needs. Aid for refugees include both short-term emergency relief such as humanitarian cash transfers for vital livelihoods programs like education for children and vocational training for adults, agricultural support services, health support services and job placement programs (Dempster et al., 2020). With the onset of covid-19 pandemic, the international donors and civil society organizations found it hard to deliver humanitarian assistance, especially given border closures, social distancing guidelines and total lockdown. As a result, refugees access to aid and livelihoods support was threatened (Dempster, 2020).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The study employed a cross sectional design with a qualitative approach. By using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participatory mapping, the study explored the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on the livelihoods of the refugees and host communities at Nakivaale Refugee Settlement. Respondents were drawn from government agencies (Office of Prime Minister (OPM) and District officials), UNHCR, Civil Society organizations (CSOs), refugees and surrounding host communities. These were sampled from Base Camp because it is the hub for all socio-economic activities for all the zones at Nakivale refugee settlement.

### **Sampling Design**

The study used stratified multi stage sampling where the researchers made a list of all villages within Base Camp, which is the hub for all socio-economic activities for all the zones of Nakivale settlement. Each village was treated as a unit or cluster. Simple random sampling was used to select 5 villages out of 15 villages in the Base Camp.

## **Methods and Tools of Data Collection**

Key informant interviews (KII) were held with leaders of agencies including government (OPM and District officers), UNHCR and CSOs. These were supplemented with FGDs with refugees and host communities as per the refugee policy which requires that for any activity carried out in a refugee settlement, 30% should be from the host communities. Interview guide and FGD guide were used in

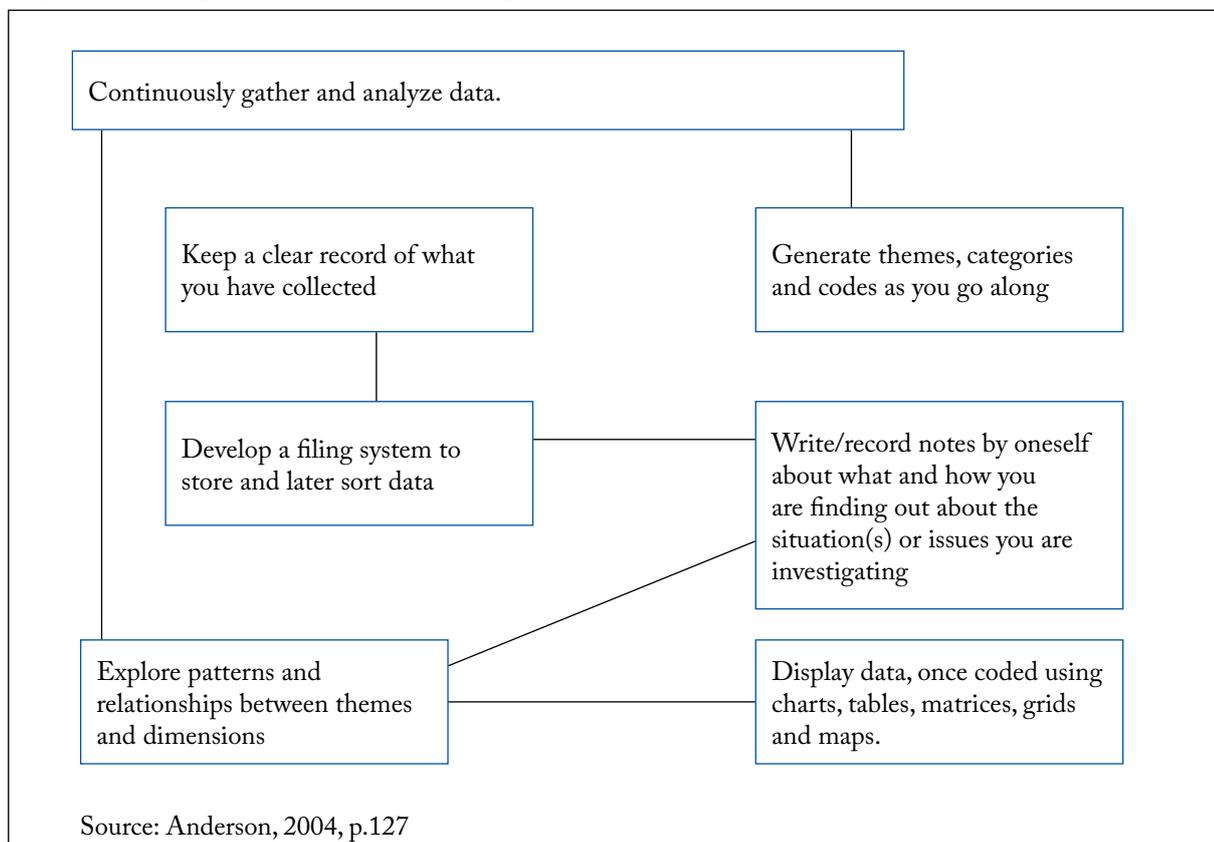
collecting data from all sets of respondents.

## Data Analysis

Data for this study was analyzed with the application of the basic principles of grounded theory consisting of systematic, flexible and data grounded guidelines for theory development. The method was adopted because it offered detailed guidelines on how to inductively develop theory from data yet permitting flexibility and issues to emerge. Under grounded theory guidelines data is analyzed and presented as it happens in the field during data collection (Anderson, 2004). Data was analyzed using content and thematic analysis principles as proposed by (Watling and Lingard, 2012)

An account of how grounded theory was used is presented below in figure 1.

**Figure 1:** The qualitative data analysis process.



## Results

The study aimed at examining the effects of covid-19 on the socio-economic livelihoods of refugees and host communities at Nakivale refugee settlement. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four main themes related to socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on the refugees and host communities' livelihoods at Nakivale settlement. These were: 1) income 2) food 3) health and 4) education. The study was also interested in establishing how the operations of government and other humanitarian stakeholders were affected by covid-19 pandemic at Nakivale refugee settlement. Here below is the presentation of the results.

## Effect on income

By far the largest impact of the pandemic to participants was a result of government imposed curfew, lockdown and travel restrictions. Respondents were asked whether Covid-19 had any impact on their daily incomes or their capacity to earn income. The restrictions on movements greatly affected the capacities of the refugees and the surrounding host communities to earn income to the level that they were accustomed to before the restrictions. Before the restrictions, the refugees had opportunities to carry out petty trading activities within and outside the settlement, they could move out to provide labour among the host communities in return for income in cash or kind, which they would use to supplement the assistance from government and donors. However, the lockdown completely eroded this capacity which adversely affected the refugees' and host communities income levels. The narratives below present a cross section of the respondents' views regarding the matter.

"We would go out to work and get both food and money for our children and families, but now we have spent 2 years in lockdown which has restricted our movement to access both work and market" [A refugee at Kashojwa, Base Camp, 01/06/2022]

As for the host communities, the lockdown which restricted movements affected them as they could no longer benefit from the labor which hitherto was provided by the refugees in their farmlands. They also lost markets for their farm produce and shop merchandise. During the FGD, a shop keeper reported that after the imposition of lockdown, the flow of her maize stock was interrupted as it stayed unsold in the store and got damaged, thus leading to financial loss.

"We lost labour from the refugees which was more reliable and affordable than from the native residents" [A host community at Kitazya market, 02/06/2022]

The economic relationship was also affected because during the FGDs, respondents from the host community revealed how refugees were members of their rural credit and saving schemes (ROSCAs) but because of the Covid-19, this was greatly affected. As the lockdown climaxed, the hitherto contributions by refugees to the ROSCAs were impinged. This scenario had a big impact on the operating incomes of the ROSCAs.

## Effects on food

In Nakivale settlement, the most cited effect of the pandemic related to a reduction of food rations. Owing to the lockdown imposed due to Covid-19, the households in the host and refugee communities faced enormous difficulties in supporting their daily subsistence. As a result, they resorted to various coping strategies to support their consumption needs. They relied on less preferred and less expensive foods to deal with the food shortage. Both the host and refugee communities adopted similar coping strategies. The host communities had to face more difficulties to access food during the crisis. Borrowing food from friends or relatives was the second most common strategy adopted by both refugees and the host communities.

All study participants expressed disappointment on the reduction of food and cash for food. Some of the respondents revealed that Covid-19 led to the reduction of meals per day. Food that used to come from the neighboring sub counties like Nyaraama, Kashumba and other areas could no longer be brought to the settlement as result of restricted movements.

“There was curfew, I would not move for food and since we could not produce every type of food, we had to suffer” [A male refugee at Kabazaana, 02/06/2022]

“It has impacted me in a big way financially; it has affected the market, everything has become expensive, food stuffs in shops are expensive; I have not received any kind of assistance from anyone and nobody asked me if I needed help [A male refugee at Kabazaana, 02/06/2022]

Respondents were asked whether they were getting food assistance before Covid-19. Amongst the e-Voucher beneficiaries (those who get cash for food), it was indicated that they used to get enough cash (31.000 Uganda shillings) per month per member of the household before Covid-19 and this would last at least a month. But during the covid-19 pandemic period, this cash rate was reduced to 13.000 shillings, which was a sharp reduction.

It was found out during focus group discussions that before Covid-19, food was cheap but after Covid-19, the food prices went up and business men took the advantage over the refugees and the host community. It was revealed that before Covid-19, each member in the household used to get 12kg of maize cones per month but during the Covid-19 lockdown the rations reduced to 3kg of maize cones.

Respondents also noted that before the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lock down, the quality of the basic food items provided was adequate to meet their demands largely due to the fact that the demand for the food items varied among the households. That even this situation permitted them to save some food stuffs for sale so as to use the cash to purchase particular household items. With Covid-19, refugees and the host communities could not save for other household items like clothes and school fees since their food rations were reduced. That they could not afford to save food for sale. As a result, children could no longer go to school because of the increased expenditure on food items. A one disappointed female refugee had this to say;

“Due to reduction on money and the fact that food prices are high here at the settlement,....I decided to send only two children to school and the other three stayed home seated due to lack of school fees.... the three have so far disappeared and I don't know where they are...” [A female refugee at Kashojwa, 01/06/2022]

It was also reported that the donors were no longer giving out food relief as they used to. Respondents revealed that they used up all the capital they had to buy food and they could no longer have any money to invest in their businesses. This was also the case among the host communities in Kitazya. Cases of discriminations in food distribution among the NGOs was also reported. Respondents revealed that there was no uniformity in food and cash distribution where some refugees got less food stuffs while others got more.

“There was discrimination in terms of food supply..... Some refugees could get 22,000 Uganda Shillings while others got 13.000 and 25.000 Uganda Shillings respectively yet they are all refugees.....” [A female refugee, Kigali village, 02/06/2022]

As a result of lack food by refugees' and host communities' households, many girls ran away from their family setups and resorted to early marriages. This situation led to a rise in teenage pregnancies and increased cases of domestic violence. Some of the respondents interviewed revealed that some parents gave out their girl children in exchange of money so as sustain their families' livelihoods.

## Effects on Health

Just like in other socio-economic livelihoods, the Covid-19 equally had a big impact on health services for the refugees and their surrounding host communities. It was reported that health units within and around the refugee settlement did not operate properly because even health workers were afraid of people coming for treatment for fear of contracting the deadly disease. Critical emergency cases also became difficult to attend to. For example, patient referrals were difficult to manage on the side of people who were seeking such services due to the lockdown, antipathy of the medical personnel and delayed supply of drugs as a result of transport problems.

People who were suffering from other diseases not Covid-19 feared going to health facilities because of fear of being isolated as the case was for Covid-19 patients.

People would get sick in their homes and fear to go to hospital because of fear to acquire Covid-19 [Male refugee at Sudan/New Hope, 04/06/22]

Some study participants reported improper medication when they visited health centers because everyone who went for treatment was mistaken of having Covid-19. During KIIs, respondents also reported cases of an outbreak of cholera which was as a result of shortage of clean water. This was commonly in Nyarugugu and Kabazaana villages. Health seeking behavior was also affected by the pandemic, and immunization of children was also greatly affected.

Restricted movements were associated with feelings of fear, uncertainty and stress due to blockage of avenues to attend social gatherings like women associations, church conventions, burial ceremonies and home visitations.

## Effects on Education

Some respondents reported that their children's education was affected, while others lost income which made it difficult to pay schools charges. School going children spent almost two years seated home. Those who went back to school after the lifting of the lockdown were forced to repeat classes and others who could not go back to school stayed home and were forced into early marriages and teenage pregnancies for the case of girls. During the FGD it was also revealed that Covid-19 lockdown increased early marriages among young girls and young boys resorted to drug abuse.

".....some of my children have been impregnated because of staying idle at home" [A female refugee at Kashojwa, 01/06/2022]

## Government and Humanitarian operations during Covid-19 lockdowns.

The researchers were interested in establishing how the operations by government and other humanitarian stakeholders were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic at Nakivale refugee settlement and surrounding villages and how they dealt with that challenge. During the key informants' interviews (KIIs), it was revealed that Nakivale refugee settlement was out of bounds and security was manned by the Uganda Peoples Defence Forces (UPDF) to prevent the spread of Covid-19. In order to prevent the spread of Covid-19, all refugees in the settlement were no longer getting food stuffs instead they were being paid cash for food (e-voucher) and according to the Settlement Commandant, 95 per cent of the refugees continued to get cash for food even after the lifting of the lockdown.

The key informants from NGOs and the public sector institutions reported that prior to the onset of Covid-19, operations in the refugee settlement ran smoothly and most socio-economic activities functioned well. Following the onset of Covid-19 and associated restrictive measures put forth by the Ugandan government, organizations had to make difficult operational and administrative decisions. For example these public and private sector agencies faced the challenge of transport limitations and inability to access their work stations. Transportation costs became more expensive because private motorcycle and car operators were restricted from movements. Additionally, KIIs reported that the prices of supplies and food items were higher and unstable, regular tasks and activities were more time consuming and there were associated financial costs with managing and implementing Covid-19 standard operating procedures.

During the pandemic, the operations were affected because donors cut their funding due to financial fatigue and partly as a result of rampant corruption in the settlement. Before Covid-19, refugees were getting 32,000 UGX or 12 kg of maize cones but this was reduced to 13,000 UGX or 3 kg of maize cones per month.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) that is mandated to take care of refugees suspended some of the funding which led to the closure of some socio-economic projects hitherto implemented by partners (CSOs). This affected both government and other humanitarian operators since most of the staff had to be laid off. According to KIIs, nearly all NGOs operating in Nakivale settlements followed the government's directives to temporarily close their offices and resort to working from home especially for non-critical staff. However it was cited that working from home was not effective or ideal.

Among the stakeholders in refugee socio-economic livelihoods that participated in the research included the officials at the district in which Nakivale settlement is located. Research participants from the district local government reported to have faced a host of challenges during the period of Covid-19 pandemic. The biggest challenges that were faced included travel restrictions, fear of contracting the disease by staff, lack of protective gears for staff and lack of adequate financial resources to provide emergency socio-economic facilitation to the refugees and surrounding host communities.

To overcome the above-mentioned challenges, the government and its counterpart humanitarian agencies responded in a number of ways;

- On the government side, there was provision of food supplies (maize flour and beans) to the host communities but not to the refugees. The government further provided sanitizers, soap, vaccines for immunization, transport facilitation for emergency response teams and security in the settlement and surrounding areas. The office of the Prime Minister (OPM) played a key role in coordinating all response mechanisms within the settlement and surrounding areas.
- The UNCHR as the main humanitarian agency in refugees' livelihoods responded in many ways to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the well-being of the refugees and host communities. UNHCR and its partners worked with central government line ministries and local government departments to manage quarantine facilities in the settlement, trained health workers, strengthened surveillances and infection prevention and control, and traced positive Covid-19 cases in the settlement.

- The other humanitarian agencies (CSOs) working alongside the UNCHR were largely affected in their work due to budget cuts and they had very little room for maneuvering the difficult working environment posed by the pandemic.

## Discussion

To slow down the spread of Covid-19, the Uganda government imposed lockdown that hampered access to essential services and strained economic activities for people across the country. This according to Kansiime, et al. (2021) left many people unable to work or access markets. This was also confirmed during the FGD where respondents reported how they could not access markets as a result of lockdown which was characterized by a curfew and restricted movements.

A study by Castro and Lozet (2020) found out that Covid-19 restrictions affected peoples' livelihoods because they were struggling to feed their families as a result of rising prices. This can also be confirmed during the field study where research participants reported restricted movements from one place to another to look for food. KIIs with the district officials at Isingiro district noted some operating challenges that were faced as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. Such challenges includes; transportation of both patients and health workers to the health facilities, transportation of Covid-19 medicines to the health centers. This finding was found to be in agreement with Castro & Lozet (2020) who reported on the increasing pressure on public services including health.

As Covid-19 made it increasingly difficult for international donors and NGOs to deliver humanitarian assistance, especially given border closures and social distancing guidelines, refugees' access to aid and livelihoods support was threatened (Dempster, 2020). As reported by the study participants especially during KIIs, there were budget cuts which increased vulnerability, food shortage thus increasing the cost of living in the settlement. Related to that, UNHCR (2021) reported that the vulnerable households, including those among displaced communities resorted to negative ways of coping such as cutting meals and cutting short their children's education.

The closure of schools affected school going children, not only in refugee settlements but across the country where schools remained closed for up to two years. Uganda, according to Datzberger, et al. (2022), enforced the longest period of school closures worldwide. This is reflected in our findings among parents who reported that most of their children had to drop out of school, some got married and others were impregnated as a result of staying redundant at home.

## Recommendations for Future Policy Responses by Government and other Actors

The recommendations presented below are based upon key findings from the study.

- During the FGD and KIIs, it was found out that refugees were not catered for when government was giving out relief food during Covid-19 pandemic to the vulnerable groups. The study therefore recommends that in future the government includes this group of people to her planned emergency responses as was done for other citizens across the country.

- Government and UNHCR to reconsider increasing food supply. The study also recommends that the food rations or cash for food given to refugees be increased to its original rations that is 31000 per family or 12kg of maize cones per month since they were greatly affected by the pandemic.
- Government to work with all other actors in refugee settlement matters to put in place crisis mitigation measures right in time before any outbreaks occur in future. It was established that by not having any prior emergency response plans, it will be very difficult to handle any future epidemic emergency responses in a coordinated manner.

## Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly affected refugees and host communities in Uganda, most especially at Nakivale refugee settlement where the study was carried out. Their resilience depended primarily on socio-economic interruptions and outcomes within and outside the refugee settlement which as greatly compromised. Perhaps more importantly, the pandemic placed refugees and host communities livelihoods in a more vulnerable state and increased their susceptibility to further socio-economic shocks. Authorities in Uganda duplicated international policy responses including physical isolation and movement restrictions that sometimes exacerbated local vulnerabilities by limiting access to food and medical supplies. There is a need for multidisciplinary, inter sectoral and inclusive response, focused on socio-economic interventions, as well as public health control measures. Continuous awareness raising, improved free and accessible health services, income support and a return to or alternative education need to be addressed to deal with the future emergencies.

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