

**The Social Impact of Congolese Refugees on Host Communities in Uganda: A glimpse of
Kamwenge District, South Western Uganda**

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Abstract

For decades, Uganda has hosted refugees from different countries and it is currently hosting around 1.6 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024), mainly from its neighbouring countries including Congolese refugees. However, the social adaptation process is an important component of the refugee crisis given that Congolese migrants are not temporary but permanent. Since Uganda has the largest number of refugees compared to any other East African country despite its poor economic performance, this study aimed at finding out how Congolese refugees have socially affected the host communities in Kamwenge district, South Western Uganda. This study adopted a descriptive research design and

employed a mixed research approach. The population of the study composed of refugees who were residents of Rwamwanja Refugee settlement, Kamwenge district, Southwestern Uganda. Both purposive and simple random sampling techniques were employed to obtain the study sample size of 210 respondents. Both interviews and self-administered questionnaires were used as tools for data collection. Among the respondents, 73.9% were female, while 26.1% were male of whom (98.0%) had resided in Rwamwanja refugee settlement for over two years. Whereas 51.7% of respondents identified as household heads, while 48.3% were not. Additionally, most households (55.9%) had 6-10 members, with 35.4% consisting of 1-5 members, indicating large family sizes common in refugee and host communities. Overall, these findings illustrate both positive and negative social effects of refugees to the hosting community. Positively, harmonious living within the community was identified and helping one another. Equally, marriage and cohabitation, suggests a social structure conducive to household stability and resource sharing, which in turn can strengthen community resilience. While negative contributions included there seems an overgeneralization of tensions between the refugees and the host communities in Kamwenge. Conclusively, though findings highlight competition for resources and other negative effects, refugees can also contribute socially to the local community.

Key words: Uganda, Refugees, Congolese, Rwamwanja, Social, Kamwenge

Introduction

Though by the end of 2016, the number of displaced people around the world had risen to 65.6 million, recent statistics indicate that by the mid-2022, global forced displacement had reached 103 million, and the largest number ever recorded, according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR. Whereas Uganda hosts the largest number of refugees in Africa totalling to around 1.6 million with majority of whom coming from the neighbouring countries of South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi (UNHCR, 2024). The country is holding the burden of hosting forced migrants beyond its capability according to its poor economic performance which is shaped by poverty and unemployment that force even many of the Ugandan natives to vacate the country in search of opportunities in the foreign countries including the neighbouring South Sudan, Kenya and Rwanda (Balonde & Akcay, 2023).

It is worth noting that the people forced to migrate are given different statuses; such as asylum seeker, refugee, and people under temporary protection by the countries of escape (Chant, 2013). Thus, Uganda has been facing two linked but distinct challenges: Together with the international community, it has to simultaneously provide emergency aid and long-term development support and find a transition from one to the other. Arriving refugees need to receive basic needs and services while at the same time sustainable health and education systems as well as employment opportunities should be open to those persons that have to stay longer. All these tasks run the risk

of being fulfilled at the cost of the local Ugandan population due to a tight public budget and sensitive economic environment (Puerto Gomez & Christensen, 2010).

This study is especially paramount as Uganda is in the course of combining public service provision for refugees and guarantying them freedom of movement and access to employment opportunities. These policy reforms affect the population living near the refugee settlement areas and at the same time, they can only succeed if this important stakeholder is sufficiently included in the process (Kreibaum, 2014). Nevertheless, the establishment of the refugee camp in Rwamwanja attracted many refugees in the area, this however dramatically changed the demography of the area and later led to the expansion of the town, the pressure on natural environment, booming of trade among others. This was not only the feature in Rwamwanja but all over Kamwenge District and other refugee settlement areas in Uganda. Therefore, this study will analyse the social impact of refugees on the host population in Uganda, with a case study of Rwamwanja refugee settlement in Kamwenge district. The study will further determine the factors that has contributed to the social coercion between refugee and host community in Kamwenge district.

Literature Review

The reception of refugees in Uganda dates back to the early 1940, when it received 7,000 Polish refugees who were mainly women and children. These refugees were settled in two rural settlements, namely, Kojja in Mukono district and Nyabyeya in Masindi district respectively (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1998). Nevertheless, the political upheavals in Congo in the late 1950s led to the forced migration of Congolese into Uganda. Though it is difficult to estimate the exact number of refugees who came from Congo at that time, their number was large and some was settled at Kyaka refugee settlement near the Kazinga channel in Kabarole district while others moved to other parts of Uganda such as Bundibugyo, Kasese and Kampala (Mulumba, 2005). Researchers Kadigo and Maystadt (2023) acknowledged that Uganda has received an average of approximately 161,000 refugees annually since its independence in 1962 and a monthly average of 17,000 refugees between October 2018 and February 2019 respectively.

Currently, Uganda hosts about 1.6 million refugees from different countries with majority (56.3%) from South Sudan and (31.0%) from Democratic Republic of Congo correspondingly (UNHCR, 2024). Equally, recent statistics indicates that since the start of 2024, more than 44,700 refugees were registered in Uganda, 30% were from Sudan, 18% from South Sudan, 16% from Eritrea, and 13% from the DRC. However, there have been outstanding increases of more than 15,000 in the refugee population from previous months, resulting mainly from new arrival and continuous registration activities in the country (UNHCR, 2024).

It is worth revealing that hosting communities usually consider refugees as strangers as they are associated with interfering with the ready existing social fabrics and hence making it difficult to be integrated into the existing host communities (Baruti, 2006). This is however, ascribed to the experiences that some host communities relate the problematic behaviour of refugees such as criminal activities, disease and increasing competition for the available jobs to refugees. This consequently influences policy makers in their hosting communities to tighten labour and immigration policies thereby limiting further immigration and making it life difficult for already present refugees in the country, as they are restricted in form of formal employment, social welfare and equal protection (Nakachwa, 2014).

Nevertheless, Baruti (2006) further stressed that such stringent measures force the refugees to rejuvenate, strengthen and sustain their social network both whether they are informal or formal so as to adopt and survive in the new settings. This usually up rises as a reaction to social exclusion and networks are spontaneously generated from family members, friends and fellow colleagues (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015). It is worth noting that from the social perspective, networks are also emerged into organized communities such as refugee associations, ethnic organisations, professional ties, students or neighbourhood organizations for the common good. Gender inequalities persist in refugee situations and limit the extent to which women and girls can attain sustainable livelihoods hence leading to lower productivity, increased unequal distribution of resources, poverty, insecurity, lack of opportunity and empowerment respectively (Nakachwa, 2014).

On the same note, Payne (1998) attributed social cohesion among refugee communities to the break down in gender relations and roles to displacement factors. Women and girls adopt gender roles and activities they never used to do before they became refugees as survival becomes the only focus. For example, heading households is believed to be a gender role of a man but being a refugee can shift it to a woman. On several occasions, women become breadwinners because their male counterparts see most of the work available as menial. The men engage in household duties such as cooking, doing laundry and caring for children as their wives are doing the odd jobs to earn a living (Berry & Sam, 2016). These shifts in the status quo between the gender roles of women and men can aggravate conflict and gender based violence. This shift can further push the wives away from their husbands as they feel they are no longer adequate, as they cannot provide for their families.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive study design. A cross-sectional descriptive study is a research method that involves the collection of data from a population or sample at a single point in time to describe the prevalence of characteristics or relationships within the population (Baruti, 2006). Information was collected in form of responses of willing refugees to questions constituted in the interview guides and questionnaires. The study was conducted in Rwamwanja Refugee settlement located in Kamwenge district, Southwestern Uganda. Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement is situated approximately 400 kilometers (250 Miles) west of Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. This settlement was established to accommodate refugees fleeing conflicts and instability in neighboring countries, particularly the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It provides shelter, basic services, and support to thousands of refugees seeking safety and stability in Uganda (UNHCR; 2020, IOM; 2020).

This study included all refugees residing in the Rwamwanja Refugee settlement. The area is occupied with over 220,000 people and out of these, 73,035 refugees in the area and 353 asylum seekers while 146,612 are host communities according to the Department of Refugees-under the Office of the Prime Minister (UNHCR, IOM, & Ugandan Government; 2020). The study also included some members of the host community. Equally, the target population included all refugees who live in Rwamwanja refugee settlement. Responses were solicited on a willingness

basis from 210 respondents. Both random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were employed. In this way, one participant would guide the researchers to locate the next potentially suitable respondent until the desired sample size was attained. Data was collected using both open- and close-ended self-administered questionnaires during July of 2024 and a total number of 210 were interviewed from Rwamwanja Refugee settlement. Data collected was analyzed using SPSS data analyzing program and thematic analysis for some qualitative data. However, to ensure credibility, work was frequently checked before analyzing and the standard operating procedures were used all the time during the study.

Results and Discussion

This study aimed at determining the factors that have contributed to the social coercion between refugee and host community in Kamwenge district. It is worth to reveal that among the respondents, 73.9% were female, while 26.1% were male of whom (98.0%) had resided in Rwamwanja refugee settlement for over two years. Whereas 51.7% of respondents identified as household heads, while 48.3% were not. Additionally, most households (55.9%) had 6-10 members, with 35.4% consisting of 1-5 members, indicating large family sizes common in refugee and host communities.

The Social Coercion between Refugees and Host Communities

Refugees are recognized as contributing to social cohesion through strong networks, with 97.5% of respondents observing that they enrich the social fabric. This study findings shows that refugee communities often create supportive social structures that promote trust and collaboration, which are valuable for social and economic integration, this is consistent with previous studies such as (Hynie, 2018). It is worth to emphasize that such networks facilitate both cultural exchange and community resilience, providing a foundation for innovation and cooperation in various initiatives, from business to social projects. Therefore, refugees contribute significantly to social cohesion by building strong community networks that support social integration and enrich the social fabric of host communities. This is further supported by the current findings, which indicates that 97.5% of respondents noted this impact, highlighting how these networks foster trust, collaboration, and mutual understanding. Existing studies shows that the social structures refugees develop create a sense of solidarity, promote resilience, and often inspire cultural exchange and cooperation, all of

which are vital for building inclusive societies (Hynie, 2018). These networks have proven beneficial in multiple contexts, from supporting small businesses to facilitating intercultural dialogue.

Social Cohesion and Disunity; the study findings confirm that 21.7% of the respondents reported that the large influx of refugees had strained social cohesion and created disunity. This underscores a critical implication; for instance, the presence of refugees can sometimes exacerbate divisions within host communities, particularly where resources are scarce or where integration policies are insufficiently robust (Betts & Collier, 2017). The socio-cultural impacts of Congolese refugees in Kamwenge District illustrate both opportunities and challenges for the host community. Increased cultural diversity and social integration present valuable opportunities for enriched cultural exchange and enhanced tolerance. However, resource competition and tensions related to assimilation indicate that without robust integration frameworks and resource support, some negative social outcomes may persist. Implementing policies that strengthen infrastructure, improve access to services, and foster cultural dialogue can help alleviate these issues, fostering a resilient, inclusive community for both refugees and locals.

Strain on Public Services: This study found that a large number of refugees strain public services, including healthcare, education, and housing, with 90.6% of respondents confirming this pressure. This reflects the challenges faced by host communities in providing adequate healthcare, education, and housing when large influxes of refugees occur. Therefore, local government must increase its expenditure on public services though such expansions can strain already limited budgets, further exacerbating the challenges faced by host communities. However, Jacobsen (2002) also suggests that when managed effectively, the expansion of services to accommodate refugees can lead to broader infrastructural improvements that may benefit both refugees and host populations. The need to scale up healthcare, education, and housing services can lead to investments in these sectors, resulting in better facilities, improved public services, and enhanced local development. For example, the construction of additional housing or healthcare facilities may create job opportunities and improve local infrastructure, benefiting both the local population and refugees in the end.

Access to Mental Health Services: Both refugees and host community members have increased access to mental health support services, reported by 90.6% of respondents. This reflects a proactive approach in addressing the mental health needs brought on by displacement, trauma, and the need to adapt to new environments. Supportive mental health services are crucial for fostering resilience and social cohesion, as emphasized by Silove and Ekblad (2005), who highlight the importance of psychological care for both displaced individuals and local communities affected by the influx. The study findings show that both refugees and host community members have increased access to mental health support services, as reported by 90.6% of respondents, underscores the importance of addressing mental health needs in situations of displacement. This proactive approach to mental health care highlights the recognition of the psychological toll caused by displacement, trauma, and the challenges of adapting to new environments. The implications of this finding are significant for both refugee management and the well-being of host communities.

Displacement and trauma often result in a range of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and other psychological disorders. Refugees are particularly vulnerable due to the experiences of violence, loss, and the stress of resettling in a new environment. On the other hand, host communities, while not displaced themselves, may experience psychological stress due to the strain of integrating large numbers of refugees, concerns over competition for resources, and changes to social dynamics. This dynamism highlights the need for inclusive mental health services that cater not only to refugees but also to local populations. As Silove and Ekblad (2005) emphasize, supportive mental health services are essential for fostering resilience in both refugees and host community members. Addressing the mental health needs of displaced populations helps individuals recover from trauma, improve their emotional well-being, and adapt to their new circumstances. For host communities, providing mental health services can help to mitigate the psychological impact of sudden demographic changes and ease social tensions that may arise from refugee influxes (Bhugra, 2004).

Furthermore, access to mental health services promotes mutual understanding and empathy between refugees and host populations leading to a sense of shared well-being and reducing the potential conflicts. This can enhance the overall integration process, as both groups learn to navigate the challenges of cohabitation in a way that fosters harmony and reduces social divisions.

Moreover, providing mental health services can help refugees build coping mechanisms and develop the psychological tools needed to rebuild their lives in a new context. For the host community, this access can help alleviate fears and anxiety about the impact of refugees on local resources, encouraging more positive and supportive interactions. The implication for policy and practice is that mental health services should be considered as a critical component of refugee support programs. Equally, governments and aid agencies should prioritize mental health interventions alongside other forms of support, such as housing, education, and healthcare, to ensure a holistic approach to refugee integration. In addition, collaboration between local and international organizations in providing mental health services can ensure a more comprehensive and sustainable response.

Shifts in Social Identity and Solidarity: Refugees influence local community dynamics and perceptions of social identity, as noted by 72.9% of respondents. This shift in identity and belonging can alter the social fabric, as locals re-examine their perceptions and societal roles in response to refugee presence (Turner, 2010). Such changes may bring about new definitions of solidarity but also introduce challenges for some individuals who may feel that their social identity is shifting in unexpected ways. As for 72.9% of respondents asserted that refugees influence local community dynamics and perceptions of social identity is significant, as it highlights the ways in which the presence of refugees can reshape social structures and local identities (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

It is worth noting that when refugees are integrated into host communities, there can be a sense of collective responsibility, especially when both groups face similar challenges, such as social marginalization. Turner (2010) highlights that communities often redefine solidarity to include new members, fostering an environment of mutual support and empathy. This redefinition can involve developing a shared sense of belonging that transcends national, ethnic, or religious boundaries. Such solidarity can promote social cohesion and contribute to the overall stability of the host community, benefiting both refugees and locals alike. Furthermore, the idea that refugees influence local community dynamics in a way that leads to a re-examination of social roles and identities is backed by social identity theory. According to this theory, when individuals encounter a new group (in this case, refugees), they may reassess their own group membership and the values associated with it (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This process can lead to either more inclusive identities

or, conversely, to exclusionary practices if the host community perceives refugees as a threat to their cultural or social norms.

Challenges in Social Identity and Belonging:

Findings of this study acknowledges the challenges that arise from these shifts, particularly for individuals who feel their social identity is being altered in unexpected ways. The study of Turner (2010); Hedefalk and Malmberg (2019) indicates that some members of the host community may experience discomfort or resistance when confronted with changes to their societal roles and identities. For example, refugees may introduce cultural practices, languages, and values that challenge the status quo, leading to tension or anxiety among the local population. This is particularly relevant in contexts where identity is strongly tied to ethnicity, religion, or nationalism, as in many post-colonial societies or those with a history of ethnic conflict. Studies show that communities experiencing demographic shifts due to migration can struggle with a sense of loss or dilution of their cultural identity. For instance, in Europe, there has been considerable backlash against the influx of refugees from Syria and other parts of the Middle East, with locals expressing concerns about the erosion of national identity and values (Scholten & Penninx, 2016). In such cases, the influx of refugees can lead to the fragmentation of social identity and, in some cases, the rise of nationalism, exclusionary policies, or xenophobic attitudes. However, while the finding acknowledges the challenges refugees pose to social identity; it could place more emphasis on the potential positive outcomes of refugee integration. Research by Ager and Strang (2008) suggests that the process of integration, when managed well, can lead to more resilient, cohesive communities where both refugees and locals benefit from shared experiences and mutual understanding. Focusing solely on the discomfort or challenges that arise from shifting identities risks overlooking the significant benefits of intercultural exchange, such as the enrichment of local cultural practices, increased tolerance, and greater global awareness (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016).

Findings also indicate that uniformity in the experience of local communities, implying that all members of the host society react similarly to the presence of refugees. However, this assumption overlooks the diversity of responses that different social groups within the host community might have. Hynie (2018) revealed that local reactions to refugee populations are often stratified along lines of socioeconomic status, education, and prior exposure to diversity. For example, more

educated or cosmopolitan individuals might be more open to embracing refugees, while others might feel threatened by the changes in local social identity. Therefore, a more nuanced approach would recognize these variations in local perceptions and responses.

While the findings refer to "unexpected shifts" in social identity, it does not delve deeply into the issue of stigmatization or discrimination that can arise from these identity changes. In some cases, refugees may become scapegoats for broader social or economic issues, and their integration can exacerbate divisions within the host community. The concept of "us vs. them" can be particularly strong when local populations feel that their identity is being undermined by the arrival of refugees. Researchers such as Hanson (2021); Esses, Dovidio, Jackson and Armstrong (2010) highlights the role of stereotypes and stigmatization in shaping local attitudes towards refugees, emphasizing that such dynamics can lead to social exclusion and undermine the potential for social cohesion. The finding that refugees influence local community dynamics and perceptions of social identity is well supported by literature on migration and social identity, as articulated by Turner (2010). The shift in identity and belonging can bring about positive changes, such as new definitions of solidarity and greater social cohesion, but it also introduces challenges for some individuals who may feel that their social identity is being threatened. However, this finding could benefit from a more nuanced discussion that considers the diverse reactions within the host community, the role of policy in managing integration, and the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. Greater attention to these factors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics between refugees and host communities. The finding that 72.9% of respondents noted that refugees influence local community dynamics and perceptions of social identity reveals the profound effect that migration can have on host societies. The presence of refugees can indeed shift local notions of identity, belonging, and societal roles. As Turner (2010) suggests, this process of re-examination can lead to both positive changes such as the development of new definitions of solidarity and challenges, particularly for individuals who feel that their social identity is being altered in ways they did not anticipate.

This however has significant implications of refugee influence on local social identity. When refugees arrive in a host community, they bring with them different cultural practices, values, and ways of life. As these new residents integrate, they inevitably interact with the host population, sometimes reshaping the social fabric in subtle or more noticeable ways. Turner (2010) explains

that communities are not static, and the introduction of refugees often forces local populations to rethink their identity and social roles. In some cases, this can lead to a deeper sense of solidarity and inclusivity, where members of the host community begin to see refugees as part of their collective identity. This expanded sense of solidarity can foster greater social cohesion and shared responsibility, with both locals and refugees working together to address common challenges, such as economic hardship or social inequality. However, Turner (2010) also cautions that these shifts in identity may not always be received positively. The arrival of refugees can challenge long-held ideas about national, cultural, or ethnic identity, causing discomfort for some members of the host population. In societies where identity is strongly tied to ethnicity, language, or religion, the presence of refugees can provoke feelings of alienation or fear, particularly if the refugees come from very different backgrounds. This can result in a sense of fragmentation, where some individuals feel that their social identity is under threat or being diluted. The process of redefining identity and belonging is often complex and can create both opportunities for growth and sources of tension (Evans & Fitzgerald, 2017).

Despite these challenges, the influence of refugees on social identity can lead to the development of new definitions of solidarity. Turner (2010) argues that communities can evolve and adapt by broadening their sense of who belongs and what it means to be a member of a particular social group. In the face of diversity, solidarity can take on new forms, where commonalities—such as shared values, struggles, and aspirations—become the basis for unity. For instance, a host community may come to see refugees not just as outsiders, but as fellow members of a larger human community, deserving of support and protection. This can be particularly powerful in situations where both groups face challenges related to poverty, discrimination, or marginalization, as it can foster a sense of collective responsibility and mutual aid. Additionally, new definitions of solidarity may emerge within the local community itself. Local groups may work together to support refugees, thereby redefining what it means to belong to that community. This can be seen in practices such as hosting cultural exchange events, providing joint services, or organizing community solidarity campaigns. These activities can deepen local connections, making solidarity not just a political or social concept, but a lived experience.

Challenges of Shifting Social Identity:

According to Turner (2010), refugees can cause challenges for host communities, as they may perceive them as altering their cultural or demographic makeup, leading to anxiety or resistance. This reaction can manifest in forms like xenophobia, social exclusion, or violence. The integration process can also lead to division, as some feel marginalized or threatened by the erosion of traditional values. Addressing concerns through open dialogue and community engagement is crucial for inclusive identity renegotiation. The findings show that refugees influence local community dynamics and perceptions of social identity has significant implications for both the integration process and the long-term cohesion of host societies. As Turner (2010) suggests, the arrival of refugees can lead to a shift in social identity, encouraging the local population to re-examine their roles and perceptions. This shift can create opportunities for greater solidarity, intercultural exchange, and social cohesion. However, it can also lead to challenges, particularly for those who feel that their social identity is being altered in ways that threaten their sense of belonging. Addressing these challenges requires thoughtful engagement, dialogue, and policies that promote inclusivity while respecting the cultural and social dynamics of the host community.

Psychological and Emotional Challenges:

Both groups face psychological and emotional challenges, as observed by 57.1% of respondents. Displacement and the subsequent adaptation process can be highly stressful, highlighting the need for comprehensive mental health resources (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring the well-being and integration of both populations, as emotional health is closely tied to successful social adaptation. Based on 57.1% of the respondents' narratives, this study observed that both refugees and host community members face psychological and emotional challenges. Such findings highlights the significant mental health burdens that arise in contexts of displacement and integration. It also acknowledges the need for mental health resources to support both populations and stresses the importance of addressing these issues for successful social adaptation. The reference to Miller and Rasmussen (2017) is particularly relevant, as their research highlights how displacement and the adaptation process can lead to significant stress, affecting the mental health and well-being of both refugees and host communities. Miller and Rasmussen (2017) assert that displacement, whether voluntary or forced,

typically involves loss, trauma, and upheaval, which can have profound psychological effects. Refugees often experience direct trauma from violence, persecution, and loss of home, while host communities may experience anxiety over cultural change, economic stress, and social disruptions.

Assimilation Challenges and Social Cohesion:

Study findings indicate that 34% of respondents reported difficulties in assimilation, which suggests that a significant portion of the refugee population struggles to fully integrate into their host societies. The difficulties in assimilation may be rooted in multiple factors, including discrimination, prejudice, and lack of familiarity with the host culture which positively correspond with the literature of Ager and Strang (2008). Whereas Ager and Strang (2008) narrates that integration is a complex and multi-dimensional process that involves the negotiation of identity, access to social resources, and the establishment of social relationships. Assimilation challenges are particularly pronounced when refugees' cultural or religious backgrounds starkly contrast with those of the host population. However, building trust and fostering intercultural dialogue can help bridge cultural divides and promote social cohesion. Findings indicate that such efforts must be sustained and actively managed to address the challenges that arise. However, there seems to be an overgeneralization of cultural and religious tensions. While cultural and religious factors certainly play a role in social tensions, the underlying causes of these difficulties are often more multifaceted. Hynie (2018) argues that challenges to integration are not only based on cultural differences but also on socio-economic factors such as access to employment, housing, education, and healthcare. These structural factors can exacerbate cultural tensions, as refugees who experience economic hardship may feel alienated or marginalized, which can make it more difficult to build social connections with host communities.

Furthermore, focusing solely on cultural and religious differences may overlook the ways in which power dynamics and institutional discrimination affect the integration process. Refugees may face prejudice not only because of their cultural or religious backgrounds but also due to their legal status, language barriers, and perceived economic burden. Studies show that such forms of exclusion often fuel xenophobia and make it more difficult for refugees to feel accepted, regardless of their cultural practices or beliefs (Ager & Strang, 2008). In this study 34% of respondents reported difficulties in assimilation, with 29.6% specifically citing tensions arising from cultural

or religious differences, reflects a common challenge in refugee-host community dynamics which is consistent with the literature of Brown (2011) notes that cultural misunderstandings or religious conflicts can create barriers to integration, as both groups might struggle to reconcile their practices, values, and beliefs. Refugees may have specific cultural or religious practices that are unfamiliar or misunderstood by the host population, leading to social tensions. This can manifest in various forms, such as discrimination, prejudice, or social exclusion

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlights the dual social impact of refugees on host communities. On the positive side, refugees contribute to social cohesion through cultural diversity, skills transfer, and community interactions. Their presence fosters intercultural exchange and supports social integration efforts. As Miller and Rasmussen (2017) argued, community outreach and engagement are essential in promoting positive social perceptions of refugees. By highlighting the long-term social contributions that refugees can make, host communities may better understand that refugees are not merely a burden but also a potential source of social dynamism. However, the study also reveals that the influx of refugees can strain social services, increase competition for resources, and heighten tensions within host communities, particularly in areas like education, healthcare, and household stability.

To address these challenges, the study recommends that local governments and humanitarian agencies adopt inclusive communication strategies to dispel misconceptions and promote the positive social contributions of refugees. Community engagement programs should be prioritized to strengthen relationships between refugees and host communities. Additionally, equitable policies on resource distribution for ensuring equal access to services, jobs, and housing, are essential to minimize resentment and foster long-term social cohesion. Collaborative efforts between local governments, international organizations, and community leaders are vital in creating an environment where both refugees and host communities benefit from shared opportunities.

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Ethical Approval:

Before embarking on data collection, researchers obtained formal approval from the Research Cordination Committee of the Islamic University in Uganda an independent ethics committee on its 25th sitting held on 22nd December 2024 APPROVED under the No. RCC/FHS/23/018