



International

# Survey Highlights on Self-Settled Refugees in Koboko Municipal Council

Empowering Refugee Hosting Districts in Uganda:  
Making the Nexus Work



# Introduction to the Survey

This report presents the **Highlights of the household survey conducted on Self-Settled Refugees in Koboko Municipal Council** (July- August 2018), as part of the Programme “*Strengthening Refugee Hosting Districts in Uganda: Making the Nexus Work*”. The programme is implemented by VNG International (the international cooperation agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities) and financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Koboko District Local Government is one of the beneficiaries within the programme, along with Adjumani and Yumbe District Local Governments. The Uganda Local Government Association (ULGA) is a key partner in this programme.

The survey was premised on the fact that in Koboko Municipal Council the **presence of self-settled refugees puts a lot of strain on the already stressed service delivery and is posing significant challenges to the local government**. Some of the notable challenges include: conflicts with the law, rampant cases of child neglect and abuse, prostitution, theft and armed robberies and conflicts with the host communities over natural resources and food scarcity. Besides the above, the host communities are grappling with a strain on healthcare provision, congestion in schools and at water points, poor waste management and sanitation, scarcity of housing and rising prices of goods and services. The **presence of self-settled refugees has not been provided for in the district and municipal budgeting process**, given that census data 2014 serve as a basis for planning and therefore no additional funding is guaranteed by the government and development partners.

## Why the term Self-Settled Refugees?

The term ‘**Self-Settled Refugees**’ was adopted in this survey, as a result of the interviewed refugees who self-identified themselves as **urban refugees, asylum seekers or migrants**. This is at the backdrop of the fact that most of the self-settled refugees do not meet the criteria set within the refugee act 2006 to be termed as such. Whereas some of them are legally recognized as refugees in as far as registration particulars are concerned, others have never been registered as refugees and as such are not linked to designated settlements. The self-settled refugees have some **common attributes** which informed the focus of this survey:

1. They moved to Uganda, fleeing the hostilities in their countries of origin but ended up settling down in Koboko Municipal Council, an urban, non-gazetted area.
2. They have moved to their current location due to the hardships, challenges, conditions and restrictions associated with living in refugee settlements.
3. The need to access better social services and livelihood opportunities such as education, health care, access to water, recreational activities, housing and social networks drove them away from the settlements

There is a considerable **ambiguity surrounding the status of self-settled refugees**, which presents a direct contradiction to both the 1951 Convention and the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention. The latter clearly states, anyone who enters another african country fleeing ‘external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order’ is a refugee (1969 OAU Convention Article 1(2)).

Whereas the **self-settled refugees without doubt fall under the above legal definition of a refugee, they do not qualify for assistance from Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**, as the very notion of a ‘self-settled refugee’ is in contradiction to a ‘refugee’ being defined as someone **receiving assistance and living in a gazetted refugee settlement**.

Unfortunately self-settled refugees often represent a very vulnerable group, without official status, challenges in access to services and difficulties in earning livelihoods.

# Methodology Chosen

The Self-Settled Refugee survey adopted a 100% population sample of the refugees (census method) as to reach out to the whole refugee population residing within Koboko Municipal Council. The survey focused on gaining insights in some of the **social, economic and demographic details of the self-settled refugees**. This was done through: **collection and analysis** of household demographic data; collection and analysis of qualitative responses through **focus group discussions; interviews** with religious, cultural leaders and government representatives on various aspects that affect the refugees and host communities; and **service mapping** to establish the population pressure on available social amenities.

The study that was headed by VNG International experts as part of the Nexus programme, and carried out collaboratively with the office of the town clerk, the community services department and the planning department of Koboko Municipal Council. In order to enhance the capacity of the local government structures to undertake similar studies, the political and technical structures of the Municipality were placed at the forefront of the survey design, methodology development, data collection, data analysis and review of the findings. The data was collected by trained enumerators composed of South Sudanese and Congolese graduates who have studied in different universities within Uganda.

# Challenges Encountered

Challenges faced	How the challenges were addressed and managed
1. Households refusal to participate in the survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engaged Local Council I and II Chairpersons, the Elders in the village and the South Sudan Refugees Association (SSRA) executive and neighbors to identify, engage and convince the household heads/ their representatives to participate in the survey.</li> </ul>
2. Households not being present for the survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scheduled the surveys at a time when the household head or representative is available to provide responses for the survey.</li> </ul>
3. Disruptions by Local Council I elections and campaigns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worked with the village health teams and the elders to reach the households that can be reached within the day. Revisited areas that were not adequately captured to ensure that all the households were reached.</li> </ul>
4. Fears that the survey information will be used by the government to force the refugees to go back to the designated settlements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Carried out mass mobilisation through local radio station, churches/ mosques and engaged the community mobilisers to sensitize refugee communities and households on the importance of the survey.</li> <li>Held meetings with some of the refugees and refugee associations to ensure that fears are allayed through sharing information on the purpose and scope of the survey.</li> </ul>
5. Skipping some households as a result of congestion and the mix up with the host communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spot checks and verification of the surveyed households in every cell reached and covered at the end of the exercise.</li> <li>Review and comparison of the households surveyed within the cells with information available through the Local Councils, VHTs and existing households within cells.</li> </ul>

# Findings of the Survey

From the survey findings, it is estimated that the **self-settled refugee population is about 26% of the total projected population in Koboko Municipal Council**. This population has been growing with continued escalation of the conflicts in Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. The survey established that there are **2.896 self-settled refugee households in Koboko Municipal Council**. Based on these findings it is **estimated that the population related to these households adds up to 23.128 refugees**. 88.8% of the refugees who have self-settled in Koboko Municipal Council are of South Sudanese origin. 10.3% are from the Democratic Republic of Congo, 0.5% are from Somalia, 0.3% are from the Sudan, 0.07% are from Eritrea and 0.03% from Burundi.

From the survey findings it was found that **59% of the refugee households moved from the designated settlements to Koboko Municipal Council, 40% moved from their countries of origin through the porous border points to the Municipality directly**, either through relatives or friends. Only 1% found their way from the transit centres to the host communities. **The main reasons given for moving to the urban areas relate to escaping tribal conflicts in the settlements, the need for access to better social services, seeking support from relatives and friends, limited land for grazing and cultivation, concerns over segregation and seeking avenues of earning and better livelihoods in the urban centres.**

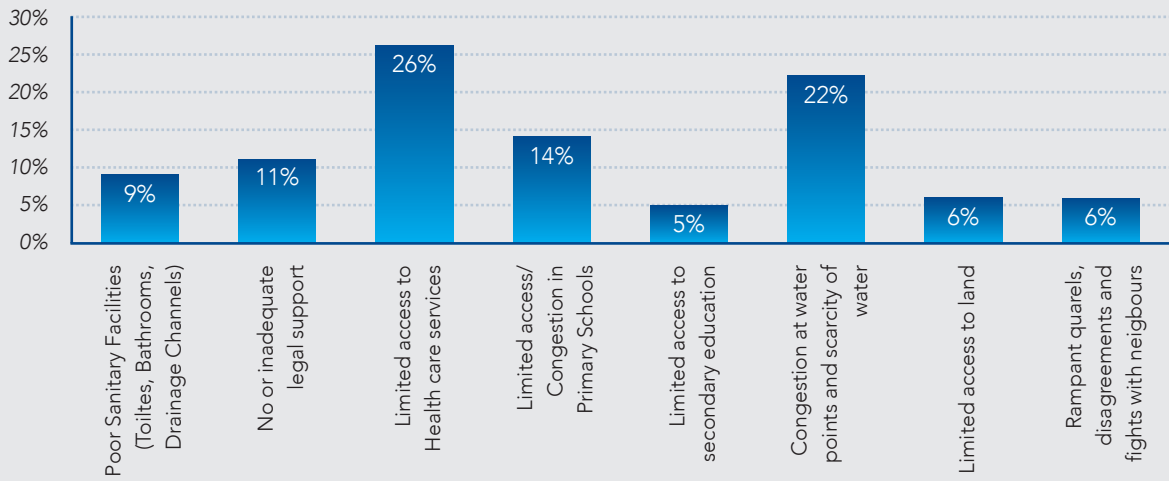
*"...I am tired of staying in the camps, because whenever my children get sick I go to the health facility, I am told drugs are out of stock, and I am supposed to travel to Arua to buy medicine... I do not have money to transport myself, let alone for buying the medicine... so why should I wait there and see my children die? I came here so that I can find an alternative, instead of waiting for these people to provide help that I cannot see..."*

Mary - South Sudanese refugee in North Division

The survey further established that local governments are having to deal with the constraints in delivering services to the self-settled refugees and host communities, as a result of pressure on social amenities, compromised standards in the delivery of quality education, constrained healthcare service delivery, congestion at water points, increased food prices and services have a large impact on the living conditions of the self-settled refugees. The survey sought to establish if households received money or any physical items from any relatives/ family members/ friends or NGOs during the last six months to enhance their livelihoods. 52.7% of the households did not receive any money or physical items from any other source, 23.0% of the households received food items, clothes and other physical necessities, 15.7% received cash support from relatives and friends. Only 6.3% received cash support and physical items from some NGOs, while 2.3% received cash support from relatives abroad. This implies that support from development partners and agencies to self-settled refugees is still very minimal.

The main areas of conflict between the self-settled refugees and host communities centre around access to basic social amenities such as water points, sanitation facilities, health care, schools, market places and other recreational facilities. These conflicts arise due to the already existing pressure on access to and utilisation of these facilities.

Figure 1: Challenges faced by self-settled refugees



“... as a mother of 11, I face a lot of challenges to support the livelihood of my children. Most times I send them to pump water for labour so that they can get some money to feed them, otherwise, I depend on the food rations from Bidibidi settlement that is never enough, because I have to sell some to take care of other needs as well. I used to get support from my brother who is in the United States, but that stopped because he is very sick and unable to support us ...”

Aler – South Sudanese refugee in North Division

# Key Observations and Recommendations

From the survey findings, it is evident that a number of refugees have self-settled in Koboko Municipal Council for longer periods than the most recent conflicts that have displaced people from South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo. Some of these refugees have lived in Koboko Municipal Council long enough to build relationships, own property and even place their children in public or private schools. However, it is also evident that a number of refugees who initially moved to the settlements have relocated to the Municipal Council. In both cases, the local governments face enormous challenges in dealing with the pressure the self-settled refugees place on the meagre social amenities and strain on service delivery in Koboko Municipal Council. This strain and pressure deprives the members of the host community - and especially, the children and women access to social services that they are entitled to, through their elected representatives. The scarcities witnessed have created social tensions and bred conflicts between the self-settled refugees and host communities.

From the survey findings, it is recommended that focus be placed on addressing the plight of the self settled refugees vis-a-vis improving service delivery by the local governments. The following issues are highlighted for the attention of all stakeholders, including but not limited to; the central government – especially the OPM, the District local governments, refugee agencies and development partners:

1

**Address the issues around self-settled refugees;** government and all refugee actors should apply themselves to the reasons of self-settling and the evolving push factors that has seen a large number of refugees move out of the settlements and opt to self-settle in the urban and peri-urban areas. This may call for a three prong approach:

- a. **Adopt a more coordinated and integrated response** in refugee issues with the District Local Governments and the Sub-County structures in tracing refugees, monitoring their movements and settlement patterns, especially in border districts and areas of high refugee concentration.
- b. **Further ascertain** the number of self-settled refugees in Koboko District to establish the patterns of their movement, activities, motivations, challenges and inform the district planning, lobby and advocacy efforts.
- c. **Localise the support** to refugee communities using structures and institutions accessible to the refugees and involving their representatives so as to ensure that the required services reach the intended beneficiaries without the hurdles of institutional red tape and bureaucracies.

2

**The activities of self-settled refugees** between the municipality and the peri-urban areas in Koboko makes it difficult to establish exactly how many refugees have settled within the Municipal Council considering that their movements are so fluid.<sup>1</sup> From the survey, it is therefore critical to establish the actual number of self-settled refugees across the district and verify their activities in order to adequately plan for their support.

3

**Inclusion of refugees in local government planning and budgeting;** during the Uganda Solidarity Summit on Refugees (June 2017), the government of Uganda highlighted the fact that "...Uganda is among the nations which has pioneered an out of camp policy in the East African region; where refugees reside in rural/urban settlements alongside Ugandan citizens...", otherwise the "Non-encampment policy" by the government. However from the experience in

Koboko Municipal Council, this policy is not being implemented in tandem with the socio-economic needs of the refugees, where they settle. In order to be comprehensive and adequately provide for both the refugees and host communities, government should deliberately adapt the out of camp policy and supplement it with structural and institutional capacity and allocation of resources to local governments, in order to ensure access to public health services, access to universal primary and lower secondary education, and to engage in economic activities.

## 4

### **The 'Open-door asylum policy' not adequately translating into progressive development;**

Uganda is being globally praised for the 'Open-door asylum policy' by global refugee agencies and institutions. The multiple access points at the Uganda-South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo borders exposes the host community to vulnerabilities that comes with poor governance, social cultural challenges, weak social services and breakdown of the rule of law in the neighbouring countries. These conditions make it impractical to sustain Uganda's open-door asylum policy and progressive development-oriented model without requisite international support and deliberate responses across the board.

- a. The policy should be shaped around improving resource mobilisation and allocation to support social service delivery in order to address the refugee influx and settlement patterns of the refugees and more specifically around the border districts.
- b. Even though the refugees who have self-settled in urban centres are perceived to be self-sustaining, the realities established by the survey indicates that their vulnerabilities are compounded by the pressure for the limited social amenities, potential for conflicts and the underlying poverty in which both refugees and host communities live.



<sup>1</sup> From the survey, it is evident that some family members move outside the municipality to take care of family animals and cultivate land, in order to feed their families. These activities need to be verified in order to establish an accurate reflection of the number of the self-settled refugees in Koboko District as a whole and Koboko Municipal Council in particular.

# Building better futures

by strengthening local governments

VNG International is an expert in strengthening local government in developing and transitional countries. Local governments play a key role in the provision of basic services such as water, waste management, health care and housing. They have profound impact on areas like safety, food security, rule of law, and women's rights.

Therefore our projects contribute in a sustainable way to better futures for people, communities and countries. In over sixty projects worldwide, VNG International strengthens local governments, associations of municipalities, and local trainings institutes. VNG International was founded in 1993 by the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten, VNG), the world's oldest association of municipalities. VNG International is housed within the association's offices in The Hague, allowing it to easily access the know-how of the Dutch local government sector. VNG International is embedded in the Dutch local government sector, while it also disposes of an international network of experts in the fields of decentralisation and local administration.

Besides its offices in the Netherlands, VNG International is represented globally through daughter companies in Tunis, the Czech Republic and South Africa, as well as over 15 local project offices. VNG International's projects are funded by various donors including the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Union and the World Bank.

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