

Country: Uganda

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## Good practices in supporting host communities through collaborative partnerships and the increased uptake of referral pathways amongst people seeking protection: An example from Uganda

### Introduction

This case study is part of a collaborative project carried out by Joint Learning Initiative and UNHCR, which aims to generate locally grounded evidence and identify examples of good practices of local faith community-led responses to refugees across 6 countries: Honduras, Mexico, Uganda, Germany, Bangladesh, and Lebanon. Twenty-nine interviews and one focus group among a total of 37 participants among were conducted for this case study<sup>1</sup>.

Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Uganda is the country program of LWF's global network of churches and LWF country offices throughout 98 countries worldwide. Responding to the influx of South Sudanese refugees at Uganda's northern border, LWF has undertaken a range of humanitarian and development interventions in Palabek Settlement, opened in the Lamwo District in 2017. According to a LWF employee, LWF's humanitarian intervention in Palabek has been the only one implemented by the organization that has included Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) programming from the beginning of their response.

The case study project in this case focused on LWF's innovative partnership with the Uganda Network of Religious Leaders Living or Personally Affected by HIV/AIDS (UNERELA), which seeks to expand opportunities for refugees and host community members to access essential healthcare resources and services to manage SRH conditions. Such interventions serve to ease pressure on Uganda, as a host country, by providing technical and operational support that aligns with national priorities. In 2017, 1.3 million people in Uganda were living with HIV, with the highest prevalence among women and young women.<sup>2</sup> Although there have been increased efforts to enhance prevention and treatment initiatives throughout the country, high rates of transmission continue to persist and as of 2016, 33% of people living with HIV still had not accessed treatment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Project leads: Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London, and Dr. Olivia Wilkinson, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI). We gratefully acknowledge the efforts and dedication of the researchers in collecting the primary data and analyzing it: Monika Akello, Molly Middlehurst (analysis and writing), and Heather Wurtz (analysis and writing).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/uganda> Persistent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a major contributing factor to the high HIV prevalence among women and girls. Women and girls who have experienced SGBV are 50% more likely to have acquired HIV than those who have not experienced SGBV (ibid).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## Expanding Opportunities to Access Resources through Inclusive Partnerships in SRH Training

Together, LWF and UNERELA held trainings in Palabek aimed at two sets of beneficiaries: Ugandan LFLs and South Sudanese refugees, many of whom had leadership roles either in the settlement or in their own faith organizations in South Sudan. Trainings were held in multiple languages (Acholi, Arabic, Madi, English) to accommodate refugees from different tribes and ethnicities in South Sudan and focused specifically on issues related to HIV/AIDS, birth control, and GBV. By training LFLs and refugees on SRH topics, the project aims to draw on the credibility of trusted local community and religious leaders in order to address and break down stigma and misinformation. LWF's own evaluation of the project was ongoing during the time the local researcher was conducting interviews.

One of the most innovative practices utilized by LWF in this training was the use and integration of theater, traditional dance, and other creative arts to raise awareness about SRH and HIV/AIDS. "They brought Bosmic Otim.<sup>4</sup> He showed people the dangers of HIV/AIDS. So, he sang and the music made some people learn how to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS." Many refugees interviewed specifically mentioned the importance of the use of traditional dances and theater performances to incite refugees' engagement and participation in project interventions. One male refugee who participated in the training said it was successful in its goals of reducing stigma and of influencing attendees to know their HIV/AIDS status:

*I see it's good because when I reflect back on the days in Sudan, though I was still young, people used to fear to go for testing. But with this training you find that the community asks when are you bringing people to test them. [The training] has made people brave to manage their health.*

Many refugees and host community informants also discussed interventions aimed at raising awareness of how to cope with gender-based inequalities, including the referral pathways for women who have experienced GBV. One refugee woman reflected on what she perceived as the most important aspects of the HIV/AIDS program:

*...They teach us that if your husband has an affair out, they should first test before you have sex with him again, and also another thing that in case someone like me has been raped, I should go seek for medical assistance within three days so that I'm put on PEP to be safe from contracting HIV/AIDS. Yes those are the good things in regard to the LWF project.*

Nearly all refugees who were part of the SRH training requested that training continue and expand to more communities so that they too could benefit from the knowledge and become "sensitized" to the issues of HIV/AIDS and birth control.

## Role of LFLs and Community Leaders: Peace-building practices and durable solutions

This case demonstrates the important role that faith actors play in facilitating humanitarian intervention within local communities. Faith actors used their positions with communities to spread messages and communicate to refugees and hosts about their human rights and the ways in which those rights can be upheld through support from other organizations and authorities. Their spiritual capital allows them to

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<sup>4</sup> From researcher's notes: "famous musician in Northern Uganda."

reach and engage with refugees and hosts in ways that non-religious actors are less likely to achieve. As one host community member reported:

*These people (faith actors) are trusted and they are giving adequate training to people and the refugees are welcoming them, that's why I said they are listening and there is a big change among them compared to the time when they had just arrived. They listen to the religious leaders like God and they focus on listening to them.*

This inclination towards trust and acceptance of LFLs and other community leaders can also be key to peace-building and conflict resolution both among rival South Sudanese tribes, as well as between refugees and hosts in Palabek. Many informants discussed the role of LFLs in helping people move beyond feelings of vengeance and resentment towards other tribes due to past encounters with violence and persecution in South Sudan. One refugee man reflected on the involvement of community and religious leaders when conflicts arose in one camp after an influx of diverse South Sudanese tribes entered the country:

*...The leaders were talking very much in church so that people stop discriminating themselves and should be united as South Sudanese. What brought us here is war and we did not come to fight here...Therefore we see that there are changes, the interaction is good between Dinka and Nuer and the Luo they are all staying well and there is nothing wrong we are facing.*

Intervention goes beyond immediate conflict resolution to create durable solutions through capacity building and education. For example, one LFL discussed an initiative in which individuals from each clan were appointed as community leaders to assist in maintaining peace within the community and in settling local disputes. LWF also promotes long-term solutions through education on rights and legal procedures within Uganda:

*As LWF, we are implementing a project on peace building, we are trying to see peaceful coexistence of refugees and host community so that they don't live in disharmony, so that they embrace one another, they don't see refugees as foreigners and also refugees don't see host as foreigners. We are trying to do sensitizing as LWF on Uganda's law, say maybe walking on road and which side to use. How to respond to abuses so that justice prevails, we are trying to tell them how to seek legal redress in case they feel their rights have been infringed on...*

Religious institutions and LFLs in particular have high visibility in the camp and are often at the forefront of peace-building practices. Such interventions are not only essential for enhancing self-reliance and long-term integration of refugees, but also for supporting host communities and promoting the ongoing development and expanded opportunities that refugee settlement has afforded, such as commercial trade between communities and growth in employment and education opportunities.

### Key Reflections for the CRRF

- LWF established **innovative partnerships** in order to **expand opportunities** for refugee and local communities to access sexual and reproductive health care services and education.

- **Gender- and age-sensitive** strategies **align with national priorities** to reduce high rates of HIV transmission, especially among women and girls, which eases pressure on the host country through operation, technical, and financial support.
- LWF creates **local, effective, and affordable solutions** by collaborating with local faith leaders and drawing on local forms of art and traditional dance to raise awareness about gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS.
- This case demonstrates the critical role that faith and community leaders play in helping to reduce ethnic tensions and discrimination, which promotes **social cohesion** and **resilience of refugee and host communities**.