TARGETING THE MOST VULNERABLE IN REFUGEE COMMUNITIES: EVIDENCE THAT CHILDREN ARE THE POOREST

This summary note is based on the research paper *Child Poverty Among Refugees* authored by Theresa P. Beltramo (UNHCR), Rossella Calvi (Rice University), Giacomo De Giorgi (University of Geneva), and Ibrahima Sarr (UNHCR). The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the positions of their organizations.

For Uganda, the researchers use data from the 2018 Uganda Refugee and Host Communities Household Survey, which was collected by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics and the World Bank and covers refugee and surrounding national households in the main refugee hosting areas in the country including in the West Nile, the South West and urban Kampala. For Kenyan refugees, data come from the joint World Bank and UNHCR 2018-2019 Kalobeyei Socio-Economic Assessment; for Kenyan nationals, we use data from the 2015-2016 Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey led by the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and the World Bank.

HIGHLIGHTS AND KEY MESSAGES

- For the first time, UNHCR and partners estimate poverty rates that account for intra-household inequality, finding that refugee children can be up to three times more likely to be poor than adults. Understanding at a granular level the well-being of refugees is essential to inform successful poverty alleviation strategies and unlock refugees' potential. As forced displacement can lead to a reorganization of a family's structure, we use a structural model in combination with data from refugee camps and surrounding communities in Uganda and Kenya to estimate the allocation of consumption within families.

- The findings are important as four out of every 10 refugees globally are children. The percentage of refugees who are children in the Eastern Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes region is even higher. The region hosts nearly 5 million refugees, or 67% of the refugees on the African continent and 20% of the global refugee population (UNHCR 2023) and the majority are children. Some two out of three individuals in refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda are under the age of 18. We show that poverty among children is also dominant in surrounding host community households, although not as severe as refugee poverty.

- Estimates show that if all countries would share the cost burden – regardless of whether they host refugees – it is possible to eliminate poverty among refugee children. The authors estimate it would take an estimated US$732 per day to eliminate child poverty among refugees in Kenya and US$379 per day in the host community. In the South West of Uganda, it would require US$1,783 per day for each refugee child and $377 per day for a non-refugee child.

- This new evidence is especially timely as both Uganda and Kenya continue to receive new refugees and the region is experiencing the worst drought on record for 40 years. Since 2021, more than 100,000 Somali refugees have arrived in Kenya to flee the multi-year drought (UNHCR, 2023a) while Uganda has received some 166,000 new arrivals from South Sudan and the DRC since the start of 2022 (UNHCR, 2023b). These new arrivals add to the already large numbers of refugees hosted in the region – 20% of the global total at last count – with Uganda serving as the largest and Kenya the third largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. Further, the data used for analysis comes from 2018-19 prior to the current drought and COVID-19 pandemic and as such it

is likely that these estimates overall are under-estimates of current poverty, adding to an even higher fragility of refugee children.

- There are several reasons for the significantly high poverty rate among refugee children.
  - First, forced displacement can lead to a reorganization of a family's structure. In the data used for this study, we see that refugee households are larger, have more children, and are overwhelmingly headed by women who then have the dual role as the sole breadwinner and parent. Female-headed households are more prevalent in refugee communities: in both Kenya and Uganda, refugee households are twice as likely than hosts to be female-headed. Notably, 72% of refugee households in Kalobeyei are headed by females. Men are not at all present in half of refugee families in settlements in South West Uganda. This figure is substantially lower (27%) in the surrounding host communities in the region.
  - Second, in general, it is a commonly known fact that children under the age of five globally have a higher average rate of illness than adults. Without adequate medical care, preventable diseases like malaria, pneumonia or diarrhoea top the causes of death for these children in poor settings. This is the case in both Kenya and Uganda, where the disparity in the national average for under-five mortality – 37.2 and 42.1 per 1000 live births, respectively – continues to be great between rural and urban areas and is particularly impacted by poverty (World Health Organization (WHO), 2022; UNICEF, 2021).
  - Third, a refugee child's disproportionate vulnerability to poverty is linked to the fact that most refugees face restrictions to the right to work (only 40% of countries hosting refugees give them the right to work), right to own a bank account and SIM card for phone use, and barriers to receiving public services like education or health. Even in settings with relatively open policy environments like Uganda, research shows refugees face barriers to gaining equitable employment and wages compared to hosts (UNHCR, 2021).
  - Finally, despite the quite different policy environments at the time of data collection, with Uganda touted as one of the most welcoming and Kenya as having more restrictive refugees' rights, refugee children in both countries are disproportionately poorer than surrounding nationals. This finding underlines the inherent vulnerability and unique transversal aspects of fragility facing refugee children and their families in both countries.

- A Child Protection Assessment in Refugee Hosting Districts (UNHCR and UNICEF, 2022) concluded that poverty is the underlying cause for all the child protection issues identified in the assessment. The assessment revealed child labour – in particular, harsh and dangerous work, physical violence, and child marriage – among top concerns identified by the respondents. The assessment further concluded that COVID-19 exacerbated the poverty situation and contributed to the increase of child protection risks.

- Our new intra-household approach to measuring poverty relaxes the assumption that there is equal sharing across all members of the household, and we find a previously unknown trend: almost half of the extremely poor children live in households that are considered non-poor. And as many as two out of three refugee children are extremely poor (living on less than $1.90 per day).

- Our finding that refugee children are the most deprived needs to be counteracted with anti-poverty programmes and policies with specific support for children. When resources are limited, programmes that support the nutrition and well-being of children, as well as their pregnant and lactating mothers, should be prioritized. To improve equitable outcomes across refugee and host communities, it is necessary for development partners to expand their food security and human development programmes to include refugee households, with particular attention given to accurately identifying poor children, as this research shows almost half of the poor children live in non-poor households.

- The evidence that children are the poorest in refugee communities in both Kenya and Uganda is supported by the poor nutrition outcomes already known to UNHCR. UNHCR and its partners have

implemented integrated community-based management of acute malnutrition in the settlements, including in-patient and out-patient management of severe malnutrition, maternal and child health nutrition programmes and additional supplementary feeding programmes during emergency phases (UNHCR, 2018; UNHCR et al., 2019; Asiimwe, 2021). Despite the numerous interventions in place to fight poverty among refugees, the situation remains critical. In Kenya according to the Standardized Expanded Nutrition Survey, the prevalence of stunting among refugee children aged 6–59 months living in Kalobeyei was 32% in 2019, which UNHCR categorizes as very high or critical (UNHCR, 2019). The anaemia rate prevalent in children was a critical 57.5% (UNHCR, 2019). The prevalence of anaemia in children aged 6-59 months and in non-pregnant women of reproductive age (15-49 years) remained above 40%, the WHO's threshold for raising public health concerns. As a comparison, a 2022 report on the average rate of stunting in North America for children under 5 years of age is 3.2%. A similar assessment conducted between 2017 and 2018 by the Government of Uganda, UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) concluded that the food assistance provided to refugees in Uganda was insufficient to meet individuals' energy requirements and to provide essential micronutrients.

- A recent UNHCR and WFP report found the daily cost of a nutritious diet was highest among adolescents aged 14-18 years. This age group has very high nutritional requirements compared to the other age groups (WFP and UNHCR, 2022). However, adolescents aged 14-18 years old have mostly been left out of food security and nutrition programing, predisposing the community to an intergeneration cycle of malnutrition. Thus, it is necessary for development actors to implement dedicated programmes to meet the nutritional needs of refugee children and adolescents of all ages to counteract poverty.

- We conduct additional analysis using machine learning and find that a few observable household characteristics stand out as the most influential at predicting child poverty. These include the child's age and gender, the age and education of the household head, household size, the number of children living in the household, and the number of rooms in the household's dwelling. Our analysis suggests that 8 out of the 15 top predictors of refugee child poverty are the same in all three sites. Moreover, there is a positive association between the number of children in the household and the chance of there being a poor child. This means that in families with more children, the odds that one of the children is poor is higher than in families with fewer children. For UNHCR, which tracks refugee households using the proGres registration database, many of these household characteristics are already collected. If UNHCR were to add a few survey fields, including basic data on household water and sanitation access, housing stock characteristics, and collect employment status universally, it could improve the accuracy of poverty targeting with potentially substantial gains for children's well-being and poverty alleviation in the short and long run. Though it should be noted that collecting these new variables requires household visits and additional financial investment, which could be sizeable if the refugee population is large. In the absence of substantial new investment, innovative solutions are needed for utilizing untapped data such as satellite imagery or mobile phone data in compliance with data protection laws.