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SEARCH
FOR **COMMON**
GROUND

CONFLICT SNAPSHOT

Uganda

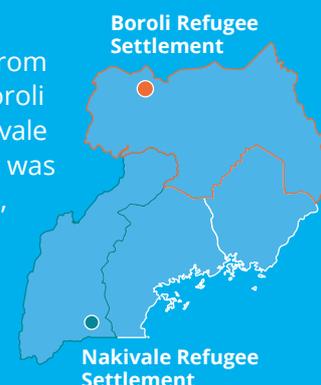
December 2020

Introduction

Uganda hosts more than one million refugees mainly from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi mostly living in refugee settlements in different parts of the country.¹ Generally, refugees and host communities try to maintain good relationships; they share services, interact socially, and intermarry. The Government of Uganda (GoU) has also given refugees plots of land, not only for residential and agricultural purposes, but to integrate them into host communities. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing tensions between these groups. On March 21, 2020, Uganda confirmed its first COVID-19 case. The government swiftly imposed a number of highly restrictive measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 soon after the first confirmed case, limiting interaction between these communities and creating a strain on resources and access to services such as maternal, reproductive, and child health services and psychosocial support services.² The country is also facing a tense election period (October 2020 – February 2021), where a number of refugees were accused of taking part in the voting, causing tension in some areas.³

Data collection and analysis

Data for this first conflict snapshot report for Uganda was gathered from September 28 to October 8, 2020 in the following target zones: Boroli Refugee Settlement in Adjumani District (Northern Uganda) and Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Isingiro District (Western Uganda). This report was prepared by the Search for Common Ground (Search) Uganda team, with support from Search's COVID-19 Response Programming Team and Institutional Learning Team. For more information on the data collection methodology and tools used by Search for Common Ground for this research, [click here](#).



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1. UNHCR, September, [The Operational Data Portal \(ODP\)](#).
2. Key Informant Interviews with Health Officials in Boroli Refugee Settlement and Nakivale Refugee Settlement conducted by Search for Common Ground on 30th September and 8th October 2020, respectively.
3. <https://www.independent.co.ug/why-violence-in-nrm-primaries/>.

Update: COVID-19 Measures and Impact on Conflict

As of the end of October, there were 11,767 cases and 106 deaths documented among Ugandans⁴ as well as 151 cases and 3 deaths among refugees.⁵ Despite a continued increase in COVID-19 infections, the government began to relax some lockdown measures in October, including opening education institutions for final year students, resuming passenger air travel, reopening non-essential business, and reducing curfew hours. Additionally, refugees and asylum seekers are now allowed to enter the country again, following a suspension of receiving new refugees and asylum seekers in March 2020, which led to the closure of all refugee reception centers.⁶

Reduced opportunities to earn money, coupled with reduced food rations,⁷ resulted in increases in reported thefts of food crops by refugees from host community gardens. Research participants also noted that increases in alcoholism and incidents of sexual and gender-based violence have strained relationships between refugee and host communities.⁸

	Schools closed
	Teleworking not mandatory
	Borders/airports open
	Only essential services are open
	Mask wearing mandatory

Police personnel are currently operating with a reduced presence, and some respondents said this increased petty crime, and accusations between refugee and host communities about who was behind the crimes, are further increasing tensions.⁹ In mid-September, clashes occurred between refugees and locals at Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement in Northern Uganda (NU), leaving 10 refugees dead and 19 refugees injured. Moreover, five refugee houses burned to the ground while another 26 houses were looted and vandalised. The violence followed a disagreement at a shared water point.¹⁰

Opportunities for interaction between refugees and host populations through social and economic activities significantly reduced over the past months as a direct consequence of COVID-19 and the related preventive measures imposed by the Ugandan Government. Restrictions have reduced inter-community engagement, including peaceful co-existence activities like joint football matches (especially in Nakivale area), which are traditionally used to discuss and address issues of common interest and concern. Movement restrictions have also limited refugees' ability to travel to work or find natural resources, and many were forced to use nearby resources to support income-generating activities, such as bamboo trees to produce handicrafts. In most cases these resources are in host community areas, triggering resource-related tensions and resulting in increased local conflict in Northern Uganda.¹¹

Heightened Stigma of Refugees

COVID-19 is perceived as a "foreign" disease. Refugees are often assumed as likely transmitters, and consequently experience heightened stigma – including by Ugandan health officials.¹² This stigma has limited refugees' ability to comply with control measures and access services.¹³ Refugees also reported hearing false information about cancelled food distributions and risks of being sent back to countries of origin, which further limited their access to food and services. If this continues, it could worsen the pandemic situation in Uganda.¹⁴



4. <https://www.health.go.ug/covid/>
5. Higher numbers of cases among nationals as opposed to refugees may be attributed to the fact that they have better access to testing. UNHCR, October 2020, Uganda Refugee Settlements: [COVID-19 Update](#).
6. [Office of the Prime Minister website](#).
7. Food ration distributed by the World Food Program and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reduced by 29%, from 8.3 USD to 6 USD.
8. Focus Group Discussion (Boroli Refugee Settlement) -Elders conducted by Search for Common Ground, 30th September 2020.
9. Focus Group Discussions in Boroli Refugee Settlement and Nakivale Refugee Settlement conducted by Search for Common Ground on 30th September and 8th October 2020 respectively.
10. [VOA website, September 2020](#).
11. Key Informant Interviews with Deputy Settlement Commandant of Boroli Refugee Settlement conducted by Search for Common Ground on 30th September 2020.
12. Focus Group Discussion (Boroli Refugee Settlement) -Elders conducted by Search for Common Ground, 30th September 2020.
13. Focus Group Discussion with women leaders at Boroli Refugee Settlement conducted by Search for Common Ground on 30th September 2020.
14. Key Informant Interview (Nakivale Refugee Settlement) Deputy Settlement Commandant (Rubondo Centre) conducted by Search for Common Ground, 7th October 2020.

COVID-19's Impact on Social Cohesion & Trust

Language and Other Barriers to Media Access are Shaping the Credibility of Information on COVID-19



A majority of the refugees and host community members interviewed trust information on COVID-19 shared in the media, particularly on prevention measures.



have lower levels of trust (somewhat, rarely)



do not trust information shared through the media

However, respondents felt information and figures related to the number of infections and deaths were exaggerated by the government as a pretext to continue the lockdown.

What is shaping trust in the media?

Not knowing the local language limits refugees' access to, trust in, and ability to share information in Uganda.

Trust COVID-19 information spread through the media



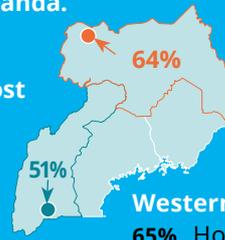
Host community



Refugees

Regional Differences

- Trust in information from the media is higher in Northern than in Western Uganda.
- In Western Uganda, the gap between host communities and refugees is much higher than in Northern Uganda



Northern
68% Host community
61% Refugees

Western
65% Host community
39% Refugees



Overall, 67% share information on COVID-19 with family and friends.



Women are less likely to share information on COVID-19 than men



People in Western Uganda are more inclined to share COVID-19 related information vs those in the North



Vertical Cohesion and the Legitimacy of Institutions Have Suffered

Institutions Face Particular Challenges to Maintain the Trust of Constituents in Western Uganda

Satisfaction with COVID-19 services provided by the Government

Only 20% of respondents asked government authorities to provide COVID-19 related services in the last three months.



Host community



Refugees



Western

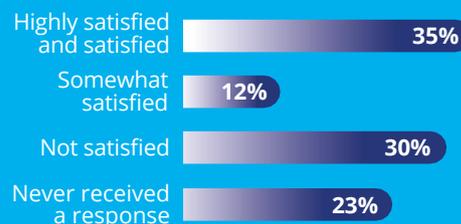


Northern

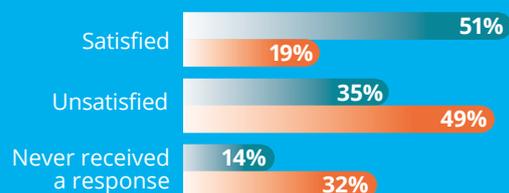
People in Western Uganda asked for services more frequently than those in the North, with the top requested services being health and access to food.



Satisfaction with COVID-19 services

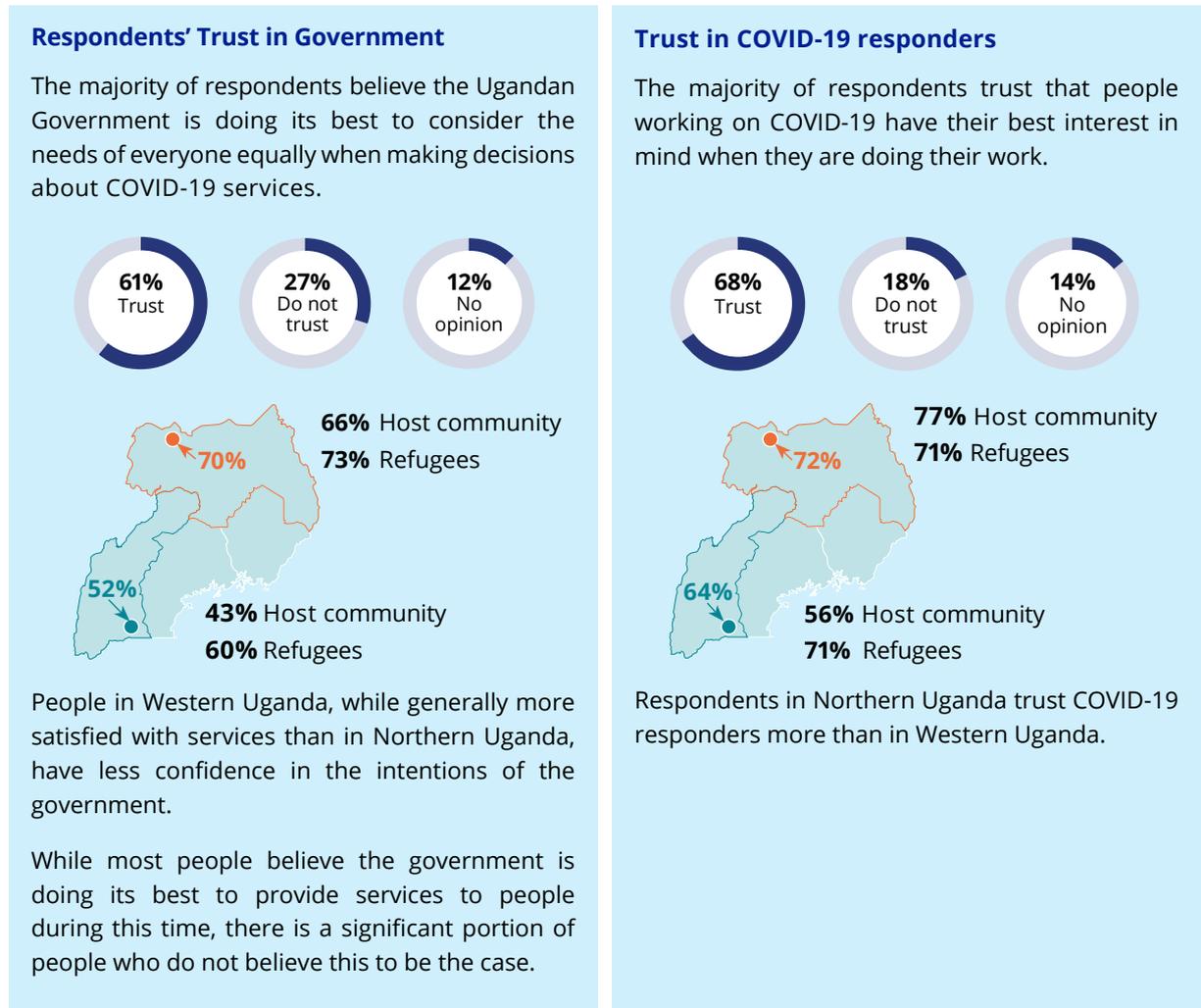


There are important variations across the regions when examining the data further:



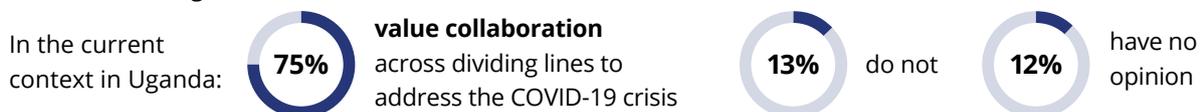
● Western ● Northern

Trust in government authorities is lower than in those directly working on COVID-19 (non-governmental organisations, local CSOs, etc.), but with important differences between the West and North of the country.



Horizontal Cohesion has Suffered as a Consequence of COVID-19, with Increased Risks for Heightened Tensions between Refugees and Host Communities

General trends about collaboration and interaction across groups send important signals for conflict. However, when examining horizontal cohesion, the most important trends to pay attention to are the outliers: who values this type of collaboration, who does not, and what influences willingness to collaborate across different dividing lines.

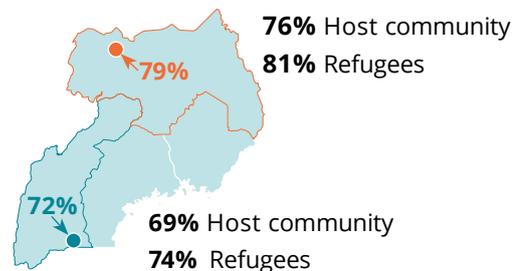


In Western Uganda, more people do not value collaboration across communities to fight COVID-19 compared to Northern Uganda.

- **The proximity of refugee and host community members has impacted historical relationships between groups**, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. In Northern Uganda, refugees tend to live near the host populations. However, in Western Uganda, these groups live at a greater distance from each other.
- Markets in which refugees and host populations sold products closed due to COVID-19, and this has **taken away opportunities for regular interaction between refugees and host communities, which are traditionally used to settle disagreements.**



In both regions, refugees value collaboration to fight COVID-19 slightly more than host community members. There are gaps and risks associated with cohesion measures across host and refugee communities that need to be tracked carefully, particularly as COVID-19 measures continue in 2021.



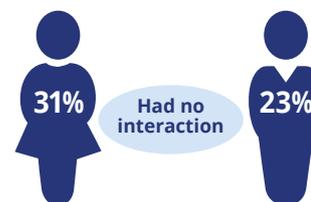
Despite COVID-19 restrictions, interaction and collaboration between individuals from the host and refugee communities still took place; **73% of the respondents reported positively interacting with individuals from another group** in the past three months, either remotely or in person.



Refugees and host communities in Northern Uganda interact more than in Western Uganda. This may be due to more markets and other common meeting places being closed in Western Uganda than in the North.



The percentage of **women who had no interaction with members from another group** is higher than for men. This may be due to certain societal and normative roles assigned to women, limiting the ability of women to interact with men and requiring women to prioritise household duties. For example, in Uganda fetching water is predominantly carried out by men, especially where long distances are involved, where men can have both positive and negative interactions with others at shared water bodies.



Next Steps For COVID-19 Response Efforts

Enhancing Credibility of Messaging on COVID-19 Response

- Credible and accessible information remains critical for effective COVID-19 response efforts. Refugees and host communities require access to accurate and relevant information on COVID-19, in ways that are accessible to all. A diversity of messaging tools, produced in relevant languages, should be leveraged to reach audiences with diverse needs and varying levels of access to different platforms (i.e. radio, internet, etc.).
- Key messages should also address other pandemic-related challenges such as stigma, rising tensions between groups, and the various demographic considerations of the pandemic. E.g., a radio drama to mitigate COVID-19 stigma and promote peaceful co-existence, or a radio talk show highlighting how gender and age are impacting people's experiences during the pandemic.

Building the Credibility of Authorities for Improved Pandemic Response

- Government pandemic-related services should be equitably distributed among refugee settlements and host communities, with clear communication about these services to mitigate misinformation, rumours, and misunderstanding, all of which can trigger conflict.
- A limited number of meetings between relevant stakeholders, such as local council leaders, refugee and host community leaders, women, and youth leaders, should continue in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines. These meetings can provide a platform for community representatives to discuss contentious issues (i.e. land and resource availability for different communities) in a timely manner before they escalate into violent conflicts.
- Government authorities should work with trusted actors (i.e. CSOs, local leaders, etc.) to coordinate the re-integration of people who have recovered from COVID-19 back into their communities. These efforts should incorporate measures to help reduce stigma and mitigate the potential for conflict or violence.
- Where possible, those involved in pandemic response should continue and modify programmes that support social cohesion (sport, cultural, or livelihood activities), in adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols, to create opportunities for positive interaction between refugee and host communities.