Higher Education Policy and Access for South Sudanese Refugees from the Bidi Bidi Settlement, Uganda

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Abstract

Globally, refugee-hosting states are required to have a higher education (HE) policy that incorporates refugees, in order to raise refugees' HE access to 15% by 2030. This paper explores the influence of HE policy formulation and implementation on refugee access and resilience among South Sudanese from the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. The study adopted a qualitative approach, an exploratory case study design, and an advocacy world view. The researcher collected data from 27 participants – 12 undergraduates from two private Ugandan universities, 13 government and non-governmental organization (NGO) officials, two officials from public and private universities – all involved in refugee education. Additionally, the researcher obtained data through a literature review, in-depth interviews with key informants and students, and a focus group discussion. The findings reveal that in principle, HE policy formulation in Uganda is incorporated in the development of the Education Response Plan (ERP) for refugees and host communities, through a multi-stakeholder approach. However, neither students nor higher education institutions (HEIs) were part of the ERP formulation process. The HE policy formulation process in Uganda traverses a value chain with intersecting complexities. These include: supra-state and national policy, refugee demographics, preferences for basic education and emergency interventions, negative perceptions of HE returns, hostility and refugee exclusion, and students' personal challenges. Relatedly, support for refugees is largely provided by HEIs and NGOs, using silo, independent guidelines. Ultimately, the findings indicate that the HE policy formulation and implementation do not address the intersecting complexities adequately, with implications for student access and resilience. This study identifies areas that could inform HE policy formulation and implementation, and enhance refugee access and resilience, especially in light of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) 15by30 Roadmap.

Keywords: refugees, tertiary education, admission, resilience, Uganda

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, states are required to ensure equitable quality education opportunities for both refugees and host communities. as underscored by the 2018 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (Crawford and O'Callaghan, 2019). Relatedly, consensus on the importance of higher education (HE) for refugees as a human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development, has been exemplified through several global and regional conventions and efforts (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNESCO, 2019). Furthermore, in its Strategy for Refugee Inclusion, the UNHCR (2019a: 15) states:

> Access to inclusive and equitable quality education in national systems creates conditions in which children and youth can learn, thrive and develop their potential, build individual and collective resilience, experience and negotiate peaceful coexistence, and contribute to their societies.

Thus, by global unanimity, countries of re/settlement are required to incorporate refugee-inclusive and receptive policy for all levels of education, including HE, into their education systems (Addaney, 2017; Carciotto and Ferraro, 2020). This is aimed at increasing refugee HE enrolment to 15% by 2030, along with the attendant dividends (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Additionally, along with the state and other key stakeholders, refugees should be involved in the policy-formulation and implementation process (Thomas, 2017). However, despite these best efforts, there are big gaps in equitable, quality HE between refugees and their non-refugee peers (UNHCR, 2019a).

Including refugees in Uganda's HE policy and systems, is accepted as the best option to expand HE access and resilience for refugee students (Uganda MoES, 2017; Crawford and O'Callaghan, 2019; UNHCR, 2021). This is especially critical at a time when Uganda is host to the largest refugee population in Africa – 1,582,892 as at January 2022, with the majority (962,360, i.e., 61%) from South Sudan, with a propensity to a protracted situation (UNHCR, 2022a; 2022b). Of the 962,360 South Sudanese, 246,310 (25.6%) reside in the Bidi Bidi settlement, where young people aged 18–34, within which the study population falls, as at January 2022 made up 26.4% (65,103) of the total settlement's refugee population. Of these, 54.6% (35,598) were female, while 45.4% (29,505) were male (UNHCR, 2022b). As indicated in Figure 1, of an estimated 71,968 South Sudanese refugees of HE-going age (18–24) hosted in Uganda, only an estimated 2,159 (3%) have access to HE (Uganda MoES, 2018; Global Platform for Syrian Students, 2020). Yet the UNHCR (2018b) notes that in 2018/2019, refugees from the Bidi Bidi settlement got only 11 scholarships through the scholarship program managed by the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and its partners and these were decreased to seven slots in 2019 (UNHCR, 2019c).

Figure 1 South Sudanese refugees of HE going age (18-24) in Uganda as at 2020

	All refugees	South Sudanese	South Sudanese in HE
Series1	116 079	71 968	2 159
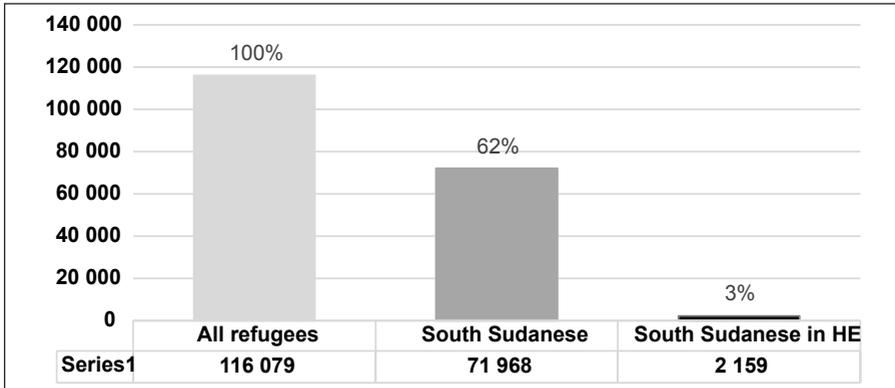
Note. This figure was generated using information from Global Platform for Syrian Students (2020) and Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (2018).

Source: Author's own compilation

Background and contextualization

State obligations to incorporate refugee HE into national education systems and yield equitable benefits for refugees and nationals, became key after World War I, as codified through the Convention of 1933. State parties were asked to grant refugees access to universities. In Britain, France, and the United States, this university education was largely to build a resilient population to rebuild Europe and foster tolerance and unity (Metzger, 2017; Brewis et al., 2020). Currently, under Agenda 2030 with the tagline of leaving no one behind, the UNHCR's Global Education Strategy (GES) 2012–2016 calls for equitable, integrated HE for refugees as a global priority (Global Platform for Syrian Students, 2020). This global call to incorporate HE for refugees in national plans and policies aims to increase refugee access to quality HE that nurtures resilience and self-reliance and fosters peace and sustainable development (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNHCR, 2019a; World Bank, 2021).

Africa continues to grapple with huge numbers of refugees in protracted situations, where at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years (UNHCR, 2020). Relatedly, many refugees in protracted situations are not accessing higher education (Baker et al., 2019). With the rollout of the CRRF in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia committed to incorporating HE for refugees into their national systems, engaging a broad range of stakeholders (Thomas, 2017; UNHCR, 2018d; Crawford and O'Callaghan, 2019; World Bank, 2021). In Uganda, this commitment is exemplified through the Education Response Plan (ERP) 2018–2021, whose underlying principle is that all refugees access quality education at all levels (Uganda MoES, 2017; 2018). While

Uganda has taken steps toward including refugees into its national systems, there is still more to learn about HE policy formulation and implementation, especially in light of the Tertiary Education 15by30 Agenda (UNHCR, 2021).

Uganda MoES (2017) and (2018) aver that Uganda assented that including refugees into HE policy in its national education system, is the best option toward mitigating issues of marginalization and discrimination, ultimately increasing refugee HE enrolment and resilience. Congruently, Uganda's commitment to incorporating refugees into its HE policy is cemented through its assenting to certain international and regional instruments and frameworks (UNHCR, 2018b; Crawford and O'Callaghan, 2019). Relatedly, Uganda's Refugee Act 2006 and the Refugee Regulations 2010 decree that refugees should have access to the same public services as nationals, including education (Uganda MoES, 2018). Additionally, the core principle of the ERP 2018–2021, which is designed within the context of the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2017–2020, is to ensure that all refugees have access to good quality education at all levels (Uganda MoES, 2017; 2018).

However, inclusion of refugees in HE policy and Uganda's national education system continues to be understated and peripheral (Kimoga et al., 2015; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Uganda MoES, 2017; Baker et al., 2019). Relatedly, Uganda's ESSP 2017–2020 and its ERP 2018–2021 both relegate HE for refugees to the fringes of policy formulation, excluding it from the strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the ESSP and situation analysis of the ERP, two key education documents. This suggests that many stakeholders, including higher education institutions (HEIs) and refugees, who have varied guidelines and experiences regarding refugee HE access and resilience, missed out on contributing through the situation analysis, meaning that their views on HE were totally disregarded. Relatedly, HE for refugees does not feature in the Uganda MoES 2020 Education and Sports Sector Review (ESSR), which could have provided another opportunity to share divergent perceptions and enriching experiences (Uganda MoES, 2020). Overall, this exclusion of HEIs, refugees, and possibly other non-state actors, in planning for and discussing progress on HE for refugees, raises concerns. It alludes to HE policy formulation in Uganda being exclusionary and shutting out diverse knowledge, when it comes to refugees. This has implications for HE policy implementation, in an environment where implementation is already fragmented and effected in silos.

Even though the ESSP 2017–2020 does mention in general terms provision of education to refugees under objective one, section xii, it does not single out HE for refugees. Additionally, while Uganda's ERP 2018–2021 in section 2 does mention that the structure of education in Uganda is defined by four levels of education – including tertiary and university education – it does not include refugee HE under its strategic objectives, outcomes, and activities under sections 5.1 and 5.2. In their assessment of the first two years of the CRRF, the UNHCR alludes to the gaps in the provision of HE for refugees, by only overtly recognizing Uganda's achievements in the area of basic education. The UNHCR report further notes that refugee enrolment

rates still lag behind those of national averages (UNHCR, 2018d). Therefore, in line with the global call to improve refugee access and resilience, drawing upon the diverse experience and perceptions of 27 participants, this paper reports findings from an exploratory study on HE policy and implementation and its influence on refugee access to HE and resilience for South Sudanese refugees, from the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. It hopes that the findings herein will leverage advocacy, planning, and further research in the area of refugee HE access, given that access contributes to resilience and enhances normalcy in the lives of refugee students.

In this paper, a refugee is defined as a person who meets definitions and requirements spelled out under the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, and specifically those in Uganda's 2006 Refugees Act. The 2006 Act refers to a refugee as, "a person who having qualified to be granted refugee status, has been granted refugee status, or is a member of class of persons declared to be refugees" (Republic of Uganda, 2006, Part I Section 2). HE in this paper refers to post-secondary or tertiary education, including academic, vocational, or technical streams, delivered at a public or private university (Republic of Uganda, 2001; UNHCR, 2019a). Relatedly, access here is admission into post-secondary education institutions through a selective and equal-opportunity admissions process, (including any support and affirmative action) in line with a country's set minimum entry requirements (UNESCO, 2019; Global Platform for Syrian Students, 2020). Part of the rationale for access is resilience, which is defined herein as the individual's ability to adapt to the refugee situation and resume learning and other life-sustaining activities, with minimal dysfunctional behaviour, within a host state (UNESCO, 2014). With the UNHCR's call to increase access and foster and enhance resilience, it has become increasingly important for host countries to formulate and operationalize, policy – referred to here as a statement of intent developed by policy actors to guide delivery of equitable, quality HE for refugees, through a human-rights oriented, multi-stakeholder approach (UNHCR, 2018b; 2019b).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Studies about policy related to refugee HE are predominantly situated in the Global North (Baker et al., 2019). The few studies from Africa are mainly situated in the seven countries that rolled out the CRRF (Maringe et al., 2017; Thomas, 2017; Crawford and O'Callaghan, 2019; Tamrat and Habtemariam, 2020). In this regard, Maringe et al. (2017) and Tamrat and Habtemariam (2020) call for future research on refugee HE in Africa, citing the relative absence of similar studies regarding various aspects of refugee education in general, and HE in particular. The literature review was aligned to the overall study purpose to explore how HE policy influences HE access and resilience for South Sudanese from the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. The literature review was further guided by the two specific study objectives: (a) to

explore how HE policy formulation influences HE access and resilience of South Sudanese refugees from the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda; and (b) to explore how HE policy implementation influences HE access and resilience of South Sudanese refugees from the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda.

Formulation of HE policy related to HE for refugees

Policy related to refugee HE emanates from the global level, and the United Nations (UN) set the basic standards for policy practice (formulation, implementation, and evaluation), based on international human rights law (Hall, 2015; Hathaway, 2018). In Europe and Africa, regional commitments and initiatives are in place to guide states in developing integration policies. However, the final say on how to integrate refugees into national policy and plans, as well as those pertaining to access to all levels of education, including HE, rests with the individual states, and this sometimes comes with challenges (Hall, 2015; Addaney, 2017; Maringe et al., 2017; Baker et al., 2019). Additionally, global policy is non-binding at state level, and states have their own internal dynamics that influence policy formulation and ultimately implementation (Donald, 2014; Hathaway, 2018). Policy formulation is often top-down, even in countries that strive to achieve a transactional approach (Thomas 2017; Stoeber, 2019). Response plans of all seven countries that rolled out the CRRF in Africa indicate that their formulation was largely top-down, with mainly national-level government stakeholders (Thomas, 2017; Carciotto and Ferraro, 2020; Tamrat and Habtemariam, 2020). Relatedly, the respective response plans have very little on HE for refugees (Ethiopia Federal Ministry of Education, 2016; Uganda MoES, 2017; 2018; Kenya Ministry of Education, 2018; Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2018; UNHCR, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2019a).

Implementation of HE policy related to HE for refugees

In Europe, HE practice is largely centralized through the state, with little to no funding for refugees (Stoeber, 2019). However, across countries in Europe, some NGOs and HEIs support refugee access and resilience (Grüttner et al., 2018). Beyond scholarships and waivers that directly support access, access and resilience are supported through language courses, sports and cultural activities, counselling and health support, child care, direct grants and loans, tax breaks, family allowances, as well as in-kind measures, for instance, (reduced rate) accommodation (Dereli, 2018; Grüttner et al., 2018; Stoeber, 2019; Jungblut et al., 2020). However, support by non-state actors is usually small in scale, in silos, ad hoc, and with little strategic or leadership support. Additionally, in HEIs, evidence cited is anecdotal; thus, interventions lack appropriate evaluation and sustainability measures (Stoeber, 2019).

In SSA, the literature on HE policy implementation and its influence on access and resilience is scanty, including in the seven countries that rolled out the

CRRF. Some of the available literature indicates that in Chad, the government requires universities to offer refugees equal terms of access and tuition as nationals (Carciotto and Ferraro, 2020). However, Carciotto and Ferraro (2020) do not give further information on refugee access and resilience at universities. While Ethiopia's and Zambia's response plans push for inclusion, admission, and rights of refugees at tertiary level, there is no detail regarding practical implementation of policy in these countries (Carciotto and Ferraro, 2020). Relatedly, in the Republic of South Africa, refugees are treated like international students and are excluded from accessing state resources, without allocation of any alternative funding (Maringe et al., 2017). In some universities, institutional bursaries and scholarships are available but competitive; thus, this insufficient funding affects refugee access and has implications for resilience (Maringe et al., 2017). Many refugees in South Africa are from non-English-speaking countries, but universities generally do not see it as their responsibility to teach students English, the language of teaching and learning.

Influence of HE policy on access and resilience

The most practical HE policy influence happens at state level, addressing institutional requirements, financial difficulties, socio-cultural and other factors, which may interfere with access and resilience (Maringe et al., 2017; Grüttner et al., 2018). Even then, there is the tendency to stereotype and homogenize refugees, despite their diverse experiences, circumstances, and challenges. Thus, refugees, especially the most vulnerable, continue to slip through the cracks, missing out on HE access (Détourbe and Goastellec, 2018; Naidoo, 2019; Stoeber, 2019. However, the few studies based on SSA, specifically Uganda, that were reviewed, do not have an in-depth analysis of policy formulation, implementation, and influence on access and resilience, within the period of Agenda 2030. This paper therefore seeks to augment the prevailing discourse by exploring the phenomenon of HE policy and its influence on access and resilience of refugees, in line with the study purpose and objectives.

This paper adopts the intersectionality theory, also at times referred to as intersectionality, which was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to interrogate societal oppressions among Black women from ethnic minorities. It has since evolved beyond gender, non-white women, and national level analysis to analyzing various relations of exclusion and privilege in other disciplines, including education and policymaking. As Rice et al. (2019: 7) note, "critical scholars across disciplines and theoretical perspectives have embraced intersectionality … as a theory ... for tackling social analysis." Additionally, it explores how exclusion and privilege are shaped by the intersectional and interlocking institutional systems and processes operating within and across national boundaries (Gyoh, 2018). Gyoh (2018) further notes that intersectionality theory deals with increasingly complex multifarious environments that intersect, shape, and influence human subjectivity and dis/advantage.

Intersectionality recognizes that marginalized, vulnerable groups, like the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, are not homogeneous victims and can actively be part of the process of interrogating dis/advantages during formulation and implementation of policy (Ekpiken and Ifere, 2015). Relatedly, intersectionality underscores the conception that phenomena cannot be analytically understood from a single perspective but from distinctive, multiple understandings of reality (Gyoh, 2018). This theory resonates well with the study objectives and methodology and has the potential to unravel the nuances of HE policy formulation and implementation for refugees (Dereli, 2018; Baker et al., 2019). This paper uses intersectionality theory to get a deeper understanding of the intersections of connected systems, structures, factors, processes, and practices that inform HE policy formulation and implementation and ultimately access and resilience of South Sudanese refugees, from the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

Guided by the study purpose and specific objectives, the study adopted a participatory advocacy world view that resonates with the intersectionality theory, and holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda and should speak to important social issues of the day, in this case equitable quality HE access as well as resilience for refugees. Relatedly, the study was guided by the belief that reality is subjective and there is no single reality, and all individuals have their own unique interpretations of reality (Creswell, 2013). The focus was on interpreting the different subjective accounts given by participants, based on their individual lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). I took into consideration my positionality as a Black, female Ugandan national with an extensive background in the education and sustainable development sectors. As a development worker and policy advocate, I have worked in refugee settlements across Uganda, often getting views and inputs from the community members. I have also had the opportunity to work closely with HEIs and government, mainly around policy advocacy, geared toward reforms in the education sector. In my work, I have read about and applied intersectionality as part of my development planning lens, but did not have the opportunity to see it applied to policy formulation and implementation. As a person who spent several years in Kenya after my husband's family was displaced by the Ugandan bush war, I know that refugees can suffer multiple and intersecting disadvantages. This study was therefore deemed important toward exploring the use of intersectionality and refugees' lived experiences to explore policy processes and outcomes. Hopefully, as advanced by Creswell (2013), the study will contribute to an agenda of change, to improve refugees' HE access and resilience.

In line with Creswell (2013) and Yin (2014), the study used the exploratory case study design, with the Bidi Bidi settlement as a single case and the phenomenon of HE policy formulation and practice and its influence on access and resilience as a unit of analysis. This design provided the opportunity to gain insight into the

complex contemporary phenomenon of HE policy and its influence on access to HE and resilience for refugees. As suggested by Njie and Asimiran (2014) and Rashid et al. (2019), the study was anchored in real-life scenarios, within the context of the Bidi Bidi settlement that hosts the largest number of refugees from South Sudan in Uganda. Based on Yin's (2014) work, the study was situated within the specific period 2016–2022, where Agenda 2030 begins and within which Uganda's ERP (2018–2021) is situated.

To ensure holistic coverage of the stakeholders, the study enlisted participants at national, district, and settlement levels, under categories of government, HEIs and students. It used purposive and random sampling techniques in selecting the participants, as outlined in Table 1. The sampling units were government ministries, agencies, and departments; NGOs and HEIs that were stakeholders in the HE of South Sudanese students from the Bidi Bidi settlement (See Table 1). In deciding the sample size, I took into consideration that 12–15 participants are recommended to provide multiple perspectives of the case phenomenon, while using additional data sources to support the findings (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Table 1: Sampling Matrix showing unit, reason for inclusion and number of participants

Sampling Unit	Reason for including unit	Participants
Ministry of Education and Sports	Ensures the policy environment is conducive. Coordinates implementation of the ERP.	4
Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)	Leads the government-led application of the CRRF which is facilitated by UNHCR and involves various state, non-state actors and refugees.	3
Education in Emergencies (EiE) Working Group	Brings together stakeholders that deliver education in emergencies.	1
Finn Church Aid (FCA)	Lead Education Partner in Bidi Bidi settlement. Has extensive experience working with refugees.	1
Windle International	Manages DAFI scholarship in Uganda. Has extensive experience working with refugees.	1
Jesuit Refugee Service	Provides refugee education including HE. Has extensive experience working with refugees.	2
Caritas	Provides refugee education in Bidi Bidi. Has extensive experience working with refugees.	1
Ndejje University	Private university with refugee students from Bidi Bidi.	5
Nkumba University	Private university with refugee students from Bidi Bidi.	8
Makerere University	Public university with refugee students from Bidi Bidi.	1
Total		**27**

S=Student GKI=Government key informant NGKI=non-governmental key informant HEIKI=HEI key informant

Source: Author's own compilation

I collected data through multiple methods, including the review of documents and records relevant to the study, semi-structured interviews with key informants and students, and a focus group discussion with students, in order to enlist diverse perspectives and a nuanced understanding, at the same time enabling triangulation, and enhancing credibility and transferability (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). I obtained a letter of introduction from the College of Education and External Studies, East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, Makerere University and conducted interviews from June to September 2022.

Data analysis

In keeping with Creswell (2013), the study applied priori and emergent thematic coding. Initially I identified seven topic codes aligned with the study purpose and questions. By the end of the line-by-line analysis, I had expanded the initial seven codes into 14 codes. In addition to the manual line-by-line analysis and generated codes and memos, I applied NVivo 12 analysis. Since NVivo clusters participants and their viewpoints under codes, it became easy to identify similarities and differences within themes.

Limitations

The human factor is both the greatest strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis and can make data subjective. This limitation was offset through extensive within and across category and level analysis. Document reviews offered additional information, especially from the global, regional, and national levels. Limitations notwithstanding, interviews were important in giving the finer individual experiences not captured in the documents.

Ethical considerations

I obtained clearance from the AIDS Support Organization (TASO), the research ethics committee (REC) with reference number TASO-2021-69, the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST) with reference number SS1186ES, and the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I assigned each participant a category, as shown in Table 1. I added a serial number for each participant and added a different letter – N, D, and S, denoting national, district, or settlement – for key informants (KIs). I also added FGD or IDI for students, to denote focus group discussion or in-depth interview, respectively. Before enrolment into the study, I informed the eligible participants about the aims of the study, the potential length of the interview, and their discretion to participate or withdraw at

any time during the study. I assured participants that all information obtained from them would be kept confidential. Finally, I obtained verbal and written informed consent from each participant.

FINDINGS

HE policy formulation and associative factors

Government participants at national level were of the view that national HE policy must be aligned with supra-national legal frameworks, since refugee issues transcend national borders, and Uganda has no substantive, comprehensive policy that addressed refugee HE (GKIN3; GKIN1; GKIN2). They also felt that national legal instruments put in place to protect refugees must be in the best interests of both refugees and nationals (GKIN3; GKID2; GKID3). At national level, the OPM takes the overall lead on all refugee matters, working with sector line ministries (GKIN3). The MoES takes the lead regarding the formulation of policy related to education for refugees at all levels, and working with the UNHCR, partners, and refugee-led organizations. These stakeholders gave inputs through discussions, for example through the Education in Emergencies (EiE) Working Group (NGKIN1; GKIN5).

> As the EiE Working Group, at national level we align all activities with the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) and the goal of leave no one behind. We work as MoES, implementing partners, and local NGOs to develop the theory of change and activities (GKIN5).

However, other participants (GKID3; GKIN5; NGKIN2) noted that HE is hardly mentioned in all three objectives of the ERP. Participants GKIN1 and NGKIN2 respectively noted that there is no special unit at the ERP Secretariat that handles HE and that for most refugee settlements, there is no budget line for HE.

The views of HEI participants regarding participation in HE policy were divergent from those of most participants. HEIKIN1 and HEIKIN2 said they were not aware of any national policy regarding HE for refugees, and had not been involved in the development of the ERP, despite handling refugee students on a day-to-day basis. At district and settlement levels, most government and NGO actors said they were involved in policy formulation for refugee education. GKID1 said that the district political and technical wings were part of the ERP formulation process, through a taskforce and steering committee that included representatives from partners and the OPM (GKID1; NGKIN2; NGKIS1). However, owing to most refugees being women and children, at district level, the emphasis was on primary education, along with secondary and accelerated learning. As a result, HE is not well funded (GKIN1; GKIN5; NGKIN2). Relatedly, there were submissions that donors preferred funding emergency interventions as they had quick returns (GKIN1; GKIN3). Furthermore, GKIN2 and GKIN3 noted that donor cycles were uneven and they viewed HE as a

long-term venture with mainly benefits for the individual. All respondents noted that there are communication avenues at settlement level through which refugees can channel their issues, citing refugee welfare council (RWC) meetings, inter-agency meetings, and the refugee engagement forum (REF) that liaise with the CRRF secretariat. Participant NGKIS2 noted that sometimes people who implement, are not interviewed. However, students also said they were not involved in the ERP consultation and formulation process.

HE policy implementation in the Bidi Bidi settlement and in the HEIs

With no concrete provisions for refugee HE in the ERP and the ESSP, NGOs and HEIs have their own policies that guide HE implementation and support access and resilience. NGKIS3 noted:

> In Bidi Bidi, we support university students with training in peace-building, nation-building, and leadership, without ethnic segregation. We also support them to form clubs to raise awareness on the importance of education. Some students are taken on as interns and have worked as role models during school-awareness seminars. We also offer them career guidance and invite them to relevant local seminars.

NGKIS 3 further noted that, "During the COVID-19 lockdown, we enlisted university students to teach their siblings in their homes." The awareness-raising and mentoring outreaches were corroborated by students who said they go out and sensitize students and communities across all zones in Bidi Bidi and in other refugee settlements like Rhino Camp (SFGD2; SFGD5; SFGD7; SIDI1; SIDI4). NGKIN2 noted that all these activities avail students with platforms to discuss issues, share ideas and build joint resilience and a sense of responsibility.

HE policy formulation and practice and its influence on access and resilience

Overall, students said that policy enables access to HE because refugees are given the same opportunities as nationals. They also said that, owing to the integration approach, which allows refugees to live in open settlements as opposed to fenced camps; they generally interact with and co-exist peacefully with the host communities. Interacting with host communities around the settlement helps students to build resilience by positively adjusting to life as refugees, which they carry to the HEIs and it helps them to settle down and engage in HEI leadership, academic, and extracurricular activities. There are HE scholarship calls, for example, those from Finn Church Aid, Windle International, and Muni University that target only refugees (GKID2; NGKIN2). There is also a bridging program by Cavendish University in partnership with InterAid that enrolls a few refugee students (GKIN5). Relatedly, SIDI1 reported:

> Sometimes they will advertise scholarships for those who have finished diplomas. In my case, I completed O-level, then I did a certificate course. After that, I did a diploma course. That is why the university admitted me directly on a degree course without me going through A-level.

At the scholarship admission stage, there is some affirmative action through additional points if one has done some community work. "I was a member of the water management committee and this was considered during admission" (SIID1). However, although refugee girls and learners with disabilities are eligible for affirmative action, they do not always fill allotted slots (GKIN5; HEIKIN1; NGKIN2; SFGD4). One NGO participant therefore suggested that, "It would be good to have more affirmative action for all refugees regarding accessing loans and assessing entry points" (NGKIN2). GKID2 pointed out that, "Students also get information, communication, and technology (ICT) training, as well as career guidance and counseling. So that once they are awarded a scholarship, they don't drop out."

In terms of access, all three HEIs included in the study, have some structured support, as corroborated by both administrators and students. HEIKIN1 noted that international students pay in dollars and the dropout rate of South Sudanese students is high. The university, however, makes special provision for refugees. "Once OPM writes to us, and we have proof of refugee status and settlement, we waive international fees for refugees and they pay as nationals in local currency" (HEIKIN1). HEIKIN2 said, "When it comes to tuition and accommodation fees, refugees are charged at the same rate as nationals." Other support cited includes partnerships with NGOs, like Windle International, Canadian World University Services, and MasterCard Foundation, as well as embassies that offer comprehensive scholarships, which include intensive pre-university orientation, pocket money, medical cover, and psychosocial and life skills support, and a specific HEI staff, as well as an NGO focal point person, to specifically follow up on the scholars (GKID2; GKIN2; HEIKIN1; HEIKIN2; NGKIS4; SIDI1; SIDI2; SFGD1). However, scholarships that follow partner preferences may, for example, focus only on girls (NGKIN2). Additionally, HEIKIN1 noted that within their individual guidelines, HEIs offer a general orientation program for all students, psychosocial support, cultural exposure, and networking through students' associations, intra- and inter-university cultural and sports galas, among others. However, HEIKIN1 added that females rarely seek assistance directly: "In fact, if a female student has an issue, it is the male who comes and tells us that my sister has a, b, c, d; she needs help." Overall, respondents reported that during implementation and at graduation and beyond, it is evident that HE makes students more resilient and helps them in HEI and post-HEI life (HEIKI1; NGKIN2; SFGD7). NGKIN1 said:

> Recently we had a meeting with the students whom we support at university. Their discussion with us showed that they are focusing on peace-building. The

stories which they were telling us were, "When we are done with education, we wish to change our nation." We also noted that they now select their student leaders based on merit and do not segregate potential leaders based on ethnicity or clans.

Enablers and challenges that intersect with HE policy formulation and implementation

As enablers, many participants mentioned scholarships, HEI, and partner support in the settlement. Students specifically mentioned peace and security, scholarships, good grades (at senior 4 and 6), good health, and serving in community as key enablers. Additionally, they mentioned the desire to break family cycles of no or low education, change mind-sets and inspire others, and dreams of one day returning home and rebuilding South Sudan. Students also noted that the HEI environment enabled them to regain trust and socialize better, owing to the HEI ethics, academic group discussions, students' associations, and sports and cultural galas (SIDI1; SIDI3).

On challenges that intersect with policy formulation and implementation, participants mentioned mainly culture, religious factors, and mind-sets that continue to affect HE access, especially for the girl-child (GKIN2; GKIN4; GKIN5). Ethnic violence, between refugees or hosts and refugees, sometimes flares up in both settlements and HEIs (HEIKIN1; SFGD7, SIDI1; SIDI2; SIDI3; SIDI4). Food, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), lighting, health facilities, and family challenges in settlements are areas that affect resilience (GKIN3; SFGD7, SIDI1; SIDI2; SIDI3; SIDI4). There is no university in the settlement and refugee students cannot commute, yet accommodation and other costs are expensive. On World Refugee Day 2022, refugees said very few organizations offer scholarships, and publicity of opportunities is low (DKIN2; GKID2; NGKIS1; NGKIS2). Relatedly, the process of accrediting and equating papers is expensive and a hindrance to access (GKID3; GKIN3; NGKIN2). NGKIS1 summed it up well when they said there is need to have a national study to properly assess refugee enrolment and all factors affecting it in Uganda.

Students added that they find the scholarship application process challenging, given that they have to work within stipulated deadlines, yet they have limited resources, and there are costs involved. Online application and virtual interviews were introduced owing to COVID-19 but not all students have smart phones, or can access internet or data. Students also compete for scholarships with those from good schools in Kampala (GKID2; SIID1). Many qualify, but there are very few scholarships and no district quotas or general affirmative action, so many drop out (GKIN1; SIDI4; SFGD2). Scholarship calls are not in tandem with the calendar of public universities, which means that admission is mostly to private universities (GKIN2). Many refugee students are above the age of 30, mature, with children and baby-sitters and they need additional support, which may not always be offered (HEIKIN1; GKIN2). Additionally, sometimes funds are remitted late (SIDI1). While

students said that they found life at the HEIs generally good, they cited challenges including lecturers who are not always supportive, and difficulty adjusting to new diets, social life, and dress codes. Furthermore, security, especially for girls, is a challenge, since there is the misconception that South Sudanese have a lot of money (SIDI1; SFGD5). During practical in-community placements, students who interact with communities e.g., those studying agriculture, face challenges with language/communication. The students further noted that sometimes challenges back home in the settlement interfere with life at the HEI. For instance, sometimes family members reach out and ask the students to contribute toward food and basic needs for younger siblings (SIDI2; SFGD3). Regarding long-term resilience in the form of employment, all students decried discrimination, saying, "We are only employed as volunteers or classroom assistants." This was corroborated by NGO and government respondents, who said refugees cannot be registered as teachers because registration requires a national identification number. Therefore, it is mainly NGOs that employ refugees (GKID3; GKIN1; NGKIN2; NGKIN3).

DISCUSSION

How does HE policy formulation influence access and resilience for refugees?

The current study revealed that Uganda recognizes and is committed to refugee rights in education, including HE and in this regard is signatory to several international and regional human rights instruments. Findings further indicate that in principle, in Uganda, HE policy formulation for refugees and host communities is part of the ERP development process, which is largely top-down and state-driven. It involves multiple stakeholders drawn from government, UN agencies, and NGO partners, but with explicit exclusion of HEIs and refugee students throughout the policy-formulation value chain. This is despite findings indicating that HEIs and students have invaluable views and information that could feed into the situational analysis of the ERP, and the opportunities and threats of the ESSP. This information could be useful in filling the gaps in the respective situational and SWOT analyses with regard to HE, thus enriching these two key education documents. Relatedly, the findings indicate that the views of HEIs and students would be of immense value to the HE policy formulation given that it traverses several tiers and interacts with a number of factors. From the study, it is evident that the views and perspectives of HEIs and students can give deeper insight into some of these factors. These include: in-settlement and family challenges; issues of gender and inclusion; cultural and ethnic norms; host community hostility and exclusion; limited scholarship opportunities; pre- and post-admission challenges; and existing coping mechanisms, support systems, and enablers that influence refugee HE access and resilience. Given that the refugee students are the rights holders and beneficiaries of the resultant HE policy, it is important that their diverse and unique experiences are used to inform this

important process that is ultimately aimed at increasing refugee students' HE access and attendant resilience.

The need to employ a multi-stakeholder approach that captures diverse views and perspectives, including those of the vulnerable, such as refugees, who are often represented by the "privileged," resonates with other studies and the intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, there are studies that maintain that in light of the refugee vulnerabilities, poor social protection, as well refugee contexts, any refugee intervention requires varied stakeholder involvement, including that of refugees, that considers the diverse experiences, concerns, and needs (Baker et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2019). Diverse views and perspectives would also help minimize the over-generalization or simplification of local realities that may inform policy formulation, as evidenced by its slight mention in the ERP, without situation-analysis objectives or activities.

The study further revealed that even with the involvement of the government, the UNHCR, and development partners in the ERP policy formulation process, owing to complex factors, in Uganda, HE was slowly pushed to the fringes, with no objectives and activities in the ERP. The government participants and the NGO partners attributed this to factors such as: large numbers of refugees of ECCE and primary school going age; HE being expensive and less appealing to donors as opposed to emergency interventions and basic education; no HEI institutions; and poor and inconsistent donor support for HE. Nevertheless, while they acknowledge these factors that are disabling to HE policy and ultimately refugee access and resilience, there was no strong indication of making a compelling case for including HE more substantively in the ERP, or any mitigation measures to step up resources for HE for refugees. On the other hand, some of the government respondents maintained that for now, HE refugee access can be guided by the supra-national policy documents, which also have guidelines for resilience but do not answer the key question of how HE for refugees will get the much-needed resources. Perhaps this is not a question for Uganda only, given that several studies, for instance, Baker et al. (2019) reveal that owing to socio-economic factors, protracted situations, donor preferences, and other complexities, both global and national policy tend to relegate refugee education, specifically HE, to the fringes, with ramifications for access and resilience.

How HE policy implementation influences access and resilience for refugees

The current study revealed that in Uganda, higher education policy practice is largely fragmented with no generic strategic guidelines or leadership. Relatedly, policy practice takes place primarily in the settlement and the HEIs, largely through individual NGOs, HEIs, and the students, with little or no support from the state. The little support from the government is in the form of waivers, where refugees are charged university dues as nationals. Even then, these waivers are only attainable in some public universities and private universities. Additionally, NGOs and HEIs have their own guidelines within which they manage pre-admission and post-admission

processes and support. As part of their support, the NGOs provide comprehensive scholarship packages, and like HEIs, often proactively engage students through participatory student-centered activities, which largely use "one size fits all" approaches, which cannot adequately cater for all personal factors as well as social and economic circumstances mentioned by the students. These factors include inadequate food and other family challenges, parental neglect, timidity, trust issues, dietary constraints, and child support, among others.

This study further showed that despite the best intentions of the NGOs and HEIs, this fragmented, often generic support has implications for student access and resilience. This is largely because support is limited to only a few, as is the case with the bridging programs. Scholarships offered are also limited, yet scholarships were cited among the main enablers to refugee HE access, owing to their comprehensive nature (e.g., stipends, ICT and psycho-social support, leadership and exposure, medical cover, and internships). Their comprehensive nature was also seen as contributing to enabling students settle in and build the much-needed resilience to continue with HE in a host country. While various participants from across groups and levels concurred that the existing scholarship support was inadequate, there were no specific strategies to close this gap within their contexts and the broader national context. This yet again raised concerns especially in light of the Tertiary Education 15by30 Agenda.

Other factors raised as challenges to access and resilience have root causes that require interventions beyond those offered by the HEIs and NGOs. Among these factors are: cases of host community hostility, peaceful co-existence, equating of academic papers, inadequate food rations, WASH and health provision, in-settlement shelter and living conditions, and exclusion of refugees from the job market. However, from the findings, there is some indication that some of the current HEI and NGO interventions can be used as demonstrable models for replicating and scaling good practices like training in peace-building and promoting cultural networking and peaceful co-existence through various student-centered activities. Studies from the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia, including this one, show that HEIs and NGOs are the ones that offer most support toward HE access and resilience, again through their autonomous policies and guidelines with limited reach (Détourbe and Goastellec, 2018; Naidoo, 2019; Stoeber, 2019). Nevertheless, there are, however, some studies that show that states can have strong policies that support refugee HE access, as is the case in Belgium and Turkey (Dereli, 2018; Jungblut et al., 2020). Furthermore, the study revealed that on the whole, HE policy practice was supportive, despite being delivered amid challenges, largely arising from situational factors both within the settlements and HEIs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study aimed to explore how HE policy formulation and implementation influence HE access and resilience for South Sudanese from the Bidi Bidi settlement

in Uganda. The findings of the study confirmed that while Uganda committed to including equitable refugee education at all levels into its education policy and plans, there is no substantive, comprehensive policy that incorporates and guides HE access and resilience for refugees. Furthermore, the findings show that there are several disabling factors along the HE policy-formulation value chain. Additionally, the study findings indicate that while some of the disabling factors are known to the government and its NGO partners, the views and perspectives of HEIs and refugee students were not sought regarding these and any other factors, during the development of the ERP and ESSP. As a result, without the input of the rights holders and some of the key duty bearers, HE for refugees has no SWOT and situational analyses in the ERP and ESSP, respectively, and is only fleetingly mentioned in the ERP and ESSP without any objectives or activities.

With no set national objectives and activities, most HE interventions and support for refugees are delivered within the autonomous HEI and NGO policies, strategies, and systems. While the findings indicate that these fragmented interventions have a positive influence on refugee access and resilience, there is no indication of how they are synchronized in order to contribute to the realization of the 15by2030 target. The study has thus shown that the HE policy-formulation process and implementation can influence access and resilience with no major disparities for males and females. However, it also shows the need for more research in this area, especially with regard to: (a) the factors within the policy environment; (b) the various stakeholder views and perspectives; and (c) the need to develop comprehensive HE guidelines, objectives, and activities for refugees and host communities within the ERP or a separate policy document. Future research could therefore consider the above three areas with a view to inform the development of a comprehensive HE policy that will guide implementation and help to measure progress of both state and non-state actors in the bid to contribute to the UNHCR target of 15% refugee HE access by 2030.

The study adds to the discourse on how refugee access and resilience can be increased through HE policy formulation and implementation that intentionally include refugees, as the rights holders and HEIs as key HE duty bearers. The current study can leverage further studies in this area at a time when there is a global call to raise refugee higher education access and to leave no one behind. This is especially important for South Sudanese refugees living in protracted situations in the Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda.

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