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## **How to Make Urban Refugees Count: Reflections on data gaps and data collection during COVID-19<sup>1</sup>**

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Context Of COVID-19*

*Migration data collection, analysis and use during the pandemic (Theme 8)*

### **Abstract**

This paper examines some methodological challenges of conducting research in constrained urban environments such as those in lockdown through reflecting on research data collection with urban refugees in Arua, Uganda, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a wider reflection on good practices for remote research. The paper draws on survey responses and semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted both in-person and remotely with urban refugees; refugee service providers, including UNHCR and international organisations; and members of Arua's local municipal government, including the Mayor, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the research remains ongoing, it offers a reflection of how quality research on migration can be conducted during lockdowns and contact restrictions. In particular it posits the need for accurate census data in urban areas that includes refugees and other migrants, and the importance of conducting research with refugees as co-researchers.

### **Introduction**

In just a few rapid months, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world as we know it – and it will likely continue to significantly affect cities in terms of inhabitants, strains on

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<sup>1</sup> This research was possible due to the financial and technical support of Cities Alliance and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). It is part of a larger research project, 'Responses to Crisis Migration in Uganda and Ethiopia: Researching the role of local actors in secondary cities' based at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, and funded by Cities Alliance and SDC.

infrastructure, and even changes in urban design. At the time of writing, an estimated 90% of all reported COVID-19 cases are in urban areas, demonstrating them as the epicenter of the pandemic. Refugees and other forcibly displaced people are particularly vulnerable, and are among the most likely populations to suffer both the direct and secondary impacts of the pandemic. On top of pre-existing barriers to protection and assistance, many are now excluded from host countries' national COVID-19 responses and relief programs (OHCR et al 2020).

Today an estimated 61% of refugees and two out of three of internally displaced people (IDPs) live in cities and towns (UNHCR 2019). In urban areas in particular, humanitarian agencies struggle to find displaced people, as many offices and community centres they commonly work out of are currently closed. In some cities, such as in the case of Arua, Uganda, discussed in this paper, refugees are excluded from national COVID-19 relief because they are not legally registered as urban inhabitants. Yet particularly in the informal urban settlements and other dense urban areas where many displaced people reside, a lack of basic health infrastructure, overcrowding, and poor sanitation all contribute to the risk of transmission and infection (IIED 2020, World Bank 2020), meaning that both awareness of and access to these populations is of paramount importance.

In order for urban refugees to be assisted, their needs and situations – and most crucially, their existence – must be known. In short, data must be collected. Yet around the world, data on refugees residing in urban areas is poor, particularly in non-capital cities. Academic literature on urban displacement is often case study-focused and has disproportionately focused on capital cities,<sup>2</sup> contributing to a perception that they are the main urban destination for migrants and displaced people. Other cities and towns experiencing displacement have received much less attention as sites of settlement and integration by NGOs and INGOs in the Global South. Yet urbanisation increasingly occurs in secondary cities, which have a population of between 10-50% of the country's largest city and themselves are not the capital (Roberts 2014).<sup>3</sup> And, as Jacobsen (2017) notes, 'Towns – especially border towns in countries of first asylum – are at the frontline of refugee displacement and are often where refugees settle or spend long periods of time.' Sadly, towns such as these, as well as many municipalities, often lack the resources to identify inhabitants, such as through censuses, as well as the resources to assist inhabitants and

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Campbell, E. H. (2006). Urban refugees in Nairobi: Problems of protection, mechanisms of survival, and possibilities for integration. *Journal of refugee studies*, 19(3), 396-413.; Grabska, K. (2006). Marginalization in urban spaces of the global south: Urban refugees in Cairo. *Journal of refugee studies*, 19(3), 287-307.; Pavanello, S., Elhawary, S., & Pantuliano, S. (2010). *Hidden and exposed: Urban refugees in Nairobi, Kenya*. London: Overseas Development Institute.; Yotebieng, K. A., Syvertsen, J. L., & Awah, P. (2019). 'Is Wellbeing Possible when You Are Out of Place?': Ethnographic Insight into Resilience among Urban Refugees in Yaoundé, Cameroon. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 32(2), 197-215.; Field, J., Tiwari, A. D., & Mookherjee, Y. (2020). Self-reliance as a Concept and a Spatial Practice for Urban Refugees: Reflections from Delhi, India. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 33(1), 167-188.

<sup>3</sup> These cities have been expected to grow by 460 million inhabitants between 2010 and 2025 – strikingly higher than the comparative grown of 270 million for megacities.

non-inhabitants. This illustrates a particularly challenging gap in data on urban refugees, which becomes all the more problematic in dire public health and economic circumstances such as we continue to experience today.

This paper examines some methodological challenges of conducting research in constrained urban environments such as those in lockdown through reflecting on research data collection with urban refugees in Arua, Uganda, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a wider reflection on good practices for remote research. The paper draws on survey responses and semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted both in-person and remotely with urban refugees; refugee service providers, including UNHCR and international organisations; and members of Arua's local municipal government, including the Mayor, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the research remains ongoing, it offers a reflection of how quality research on migration can be conducted during lockdowns and contact restrictions and in particular states the need for accurate census data in urban areas that includes refugees and other migrants.

The following sections present an overview of urban refugees and data collection in Arua, and then a section focusing specifically on the research methodology of this study. It concludes with several recommendations drawn from this and other research.

### **Urban refugees and data collection: Reflections from Arua**

The district in which Arua Municipality is located hosts more than 250,000 South Sudanese refugees (of a total of more than one million across the country), with self-settled urban refugees making up an estimated 24% of its total population. However, many of these urban refugees are officially registered at settlements, meaning that they are not taken into account in municipalities, which has impacts both for urban responses to the pandemic as well as to themselves. Travel restrictions due to COVID-19 have meant that many refugees have been unable to pick up food rations from the settlements that they rely on, an issue made more pressing by the curtailing of the informal business and trade that they often engage in. City services such as health centres also risk being overwhelmed by the increased demands for services due to Arua's increased population size, which is not reflected in central government funding. At the same time, a number of community refugee-led organisations in Arua and surrounding areas have -- in the absence of formal policy -- impressively mobilised to sensitise and support refugees in the face of COVID-19.

Secondary cities and towns may lack strong ties to central government and ministries compared to capital cities, or financing mechanisms can overlook municipal needs, all of which in turn can impede municipalities' ability to access funding or for relevant municipal issues to be shared. In Uganda, for example, taxes are collected by the central government and then distributed as grants to districts; funding for municipalities is based in part on population sizes, which are determined from often outdated censuses. While Uganda's

Local Government Act provides formulas for resource allocation including number of inhabitants, refugees and asylum seekers are not included in this equation (GoU 1997). Despite decentralisation as a key policy reform for the Ugandan government in the early 1990s, municipalities still struggle to access the funding they need to operate. This issue is compounded by the fact that in Uganda refugee issues, and the concomitant international resources, are generally dealt with at a district level. UNHCR data on refugees in the country provides, for example, information on numbers in main refugee-hosting districts but does not have more detailed figures of refugees' geographic locations except for estimates in camps and settlements.

This in turn reflects a chicken-or-egg dilemma facing municipalities in many refugee-hosting countries: policies prohibiting the settlement of refugees in urban areas beyond the capital (or at all) then lead to a lack of data on those urban refugees that have settled regardless of policy. As one article on refugees in towns succinctly explains,

If you ask about the number of refugees in Mombasa, Kenya, you get conflicting answers. According to the Kenyan Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS), there are 15,600 legally registered refugees in Mombasa, over 8,000 of whom are Somalis. Yet one local security official said there are no refugees *legally* in Mombasa, and a Kenyan businesswoman reported, "There are no more refugees in Mombasa." According to a local legal aid group, there are many more refugees than are formally counted. There seems to be some confusion about the number of refugees in Mombasa. (Adan & Duncan 2020)

In these situations, 'spontaneously settled' refugees in urban areas are at best invisible and at worst targeted and vilified. Of course, being invisible and in need is hardly a best case scenario for either refugees or the cities and towns hosting them. In Arua it is estimated by government officials that many refugees reside in and on the outskirts of Arua Town (some say the town has tripled in size), but an exact figure cannot be provided as refugees are not included in the census (Interview, Mayor of Arua, 22/2/2020). Because they are not formally counted as urban inhabitants, no additional funding is allocated to yearly budgets to account for the increased demand on services that this significant number of people create. This combination of lack of data and funding makes it very difficult for cities such as Arua to adequately plan and provide for all their residents (Lozet & Easton-Calabria 2020).

Ongoing research led by this paper's author has found a troubling lack of support for refugees in Arua, which has become even more problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lozet & Easton-Calabria 2020). The majority of refugees interviewed are registered in one of the three refugee settlements (Rhino, Imvepi, and Bidi Bidi) in Arua District, and have generally returned to the settlements monthly to receive food rations. While not officially allowed, this livelihood strategy has enabled some refugees to pursue livelihoods in Arua Town while still receiving necessary extra support. However,

as part of COVID-19 lockdown measures, non-essential movement was prohibited, meaning some refugees did not travel or else had to travel in dangerous nighttime conditions. Combined with the disruption of livelihoods activities, this lack of access to food has placed an exceptional burden on urban refugees' ability to take care of themselves and their families. As one South Sudanese refugee in Arua explained in response to refugee needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, 'Since there is no data on how many refugees are in the city, there is no special consideration for the refugees in terms of food provision by the organisations.' (Ibid.) Interviews with members of Arua Municipality and INGOs with offices in Arua reveal a lack of tailored programmes to refugees' needs, while refugees themselves in Arua explain that they receive no government or INGO support.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, although a range of INGOs have offices in Arua, none of those interviewed had urban programmes and instead solely operated in one of the three nearby refugee settlements.

If urban refugees were properly accounted for in censuses, the municipalities in which they reside would in theory receive more resources from the central government to support their populations, including refugees. The provision of support could then reflect the actual number of those in need, while also potentially shedding light on the contributions such as taxes that some refugees already offer urban areas.<sup>5</sup> Stronger healthcare systems designed for the real number of inhabitants of municipalities, rather than just their citizens, could be created. And in turn the health and well-being of both urban refugees and local citizens could be improved. International organisations might have the information needed to develop urban programmes in cities and towns they don't currently operate in. Notably, in terms of research and data collection, census data offers an important starting point for further research. The extant gaps in data that preclude these possibilities from becoming reality demonstrate a clear need to include urban refugees in censuses and government planning, including development and city plans, and in cases direct more international programming and support to the urban displaced.

## Research Methodology

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<sup>4</sup> Surveys with urban refugees, #1-24. Collected August and September 2020 as part of ongoing research in Arua, Uganda, led by this paper's author.

<sup>5</sup> Please note the body of literature on tax contributions that refugees make in contexts of resettlement; however, this evidence is less robust in the Global South due to a lack of data collection as well as the fact that it is estimated that 70% of refugees live in countries with restricted or no right to work. In part due to this, most refugees in the Global South work in the informal sector. Sources: UNHCR (2020) "Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion. Webpage. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/livelihoods.html> (Accessed 19 September 2020); CDG et al (2020) Locked Down and Left Behind: The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees' Economic Inclusion. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/locked-down-and-left-behind-paper-71320.pdf> (Accessed 19 September 2020)

While the above section provided an overview of the challenges surrounding urban refugees and data collection in Arua, this research project also offers some concrete practices to assist in conducting research during lockdowns and other situations where in-person research proves challenging. In particular, this research has benefitted from working with refugee and national researchers, and with and through refugee-led organisations. Other research including past projects that this paper's author was involved in have benefitted enormously from refugee peer researchers, a component of research which is gaining increasing recognition.

Important research has drawn attention to the ways that engaging refugees as research assistants, including as interviewers, interpreters, and enumerators, can improve the quality of research – and also can pose risks for those refugees remaining in the 'field', and perpetuate ongoing issues of power and exploitation (Mackenzie et al 2007, Pincock and Bakunzi 2020). With this in mind, this paper advocates for the participation of refugees in research relating to refugees in ways that truly co-produce knowledge, rather than outsource labour and risk.

In February 2020, approximately a month before lockdowns started globally, the PI of the project (this paper's author) travelled to Arua, Uganda, to train two researchers to partake in the project, a South Sudanese refugee and a Ugandan national. The original research plan was for the two researchers to conduct interviews over the course of several months, which would be transcribed and sent to the PI, with remote meetings planned 2-3 times a week. The PI was meant to travel to Arua every three months during the duration of fieldwork to conduct further interviews. Due to COVID-19, however, this research plan was quickly altered. Research was initially halted until July 2020, when it was decided by the research team that a combination of remote interviews held over phone and whatsapp as well as paper surveys provided directly to research informants would be used. Potential informants were contacted through snowballing as well as 'cold-calling', a slow process given that many organisational employees were working remotely and not using office phones. Due to existing contacts with South Sudanese refugees, as well as through making contact with refugee-led organisations in Arua and the surrounding areas, refugees were contacted to be interviewed. Despite initial challenges, remote research has worked remarkably well. Both qualitative and quantitative information has been collected, although all involved researchers note that in instances it takes longer to establish rapport with informants than it might in-person; follow-up calls to collect more information has been useful to mitigate this.

The success of this research approach highlights the value of, and indeed necessity of, trusted community members or 'gatekeepers' to facilitate research. While many researchers would likely agree with this statement, it too often appears to be overlooked

or considered not worthy to be mentioned within academia – which in turn risks perpetuating unequal research power dynamics and a neglect of important ethical discussions on research with vulnerable populations (McAreavey & Das 2013). Yet having strong gatekeepers and researches was particularly important in the case of partially remote research such as this, as normal venues where both organisational employees and refugees could in pre-pandemic times be reached – offices – were not available.

Other research adaptations also aided data collection during lockdown. The use of paper surveys was explicitly requested by several employees of international organisations, who preferred to reflect on answers through writing rather than speak directly. The research team also offered for interviews to take place over whatsapp voice notes (messages) rather than through a direct call as needed, which several informants took up due to time conflicts in scheduling interviews. Several in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). Future surveys will be undertaken via Redcap, a secure application for building and analysing online surveys, which enables collected data to be immediately analysed on the platform. This variety of remote phone and whatsapp interviews, including through voice notes, and remote surveying, including by paper survey, has proved successful for this qualitative research project.

For larger, quantitative projects, making use of SMS and whatsapp interviewing and surveying has proven effective. For example, an UNDP study of whatsapp surveys in Lebanon noted the value of both written and voice message function, the fact that whatsapp is a widely used platform in Lebanon (and many other countries); and the fact that ‘Refugees often keep whatsapp number or update with their new one after changing countries, meaning it can be easier to stay in contact than with regular numbers that no longer work once borders are crossed.’ (UNDP 2018) Based on these features, it found that whatsapp can function for research with refugees as a ‘deep-dive qualitative survey tool’, a ‘real-time monitoring tool’, and a ‘cross-country communication tool’ in addition to others. For similar reasons, other research on refugee phone usage in Lebanon suggests that humanitarian agencies should consider moving away from mass SMS communication with refugees and towards WhatsApp (Göransson 2018).<sup>6</sup>

More recent technology can also offer large-scale research opportunities. Remote sensing imagery taken from drones or satellites are one way to gain or improve data on a range of situations, including but not limited to the population in a given area (Quinn et al 2018), human rights violations as part of ‘human-rights mapping’ (Marx & Goward 2013), and the state of infrastructure after conflict or natural disasters (UNOSAT-UNITAR 2015). One

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<sup>6</sup> The researchers conclude that ‘by retaining a Lebanese number they do not need for other purposes, many Syrians are effectively paying a monthly fee for the ability to receive SMS messages and calls from UNHCR.’

remote sensing case study, for instance, counted the numbers of structures, such as tents, in African and Middle Eastern refugee settlements in order to estimate population size (Quinn et al. 2018). It found high levels of accuracy but noted significant variation pixel data imagery from different sensors and regions, which can impede findings if not carefully examined (ibid.) While both advanced technology and expertise in analyzing the resultant data is needed, remote sensing technology offers a safer (contactless) form of data collection particularly useful for large-scale research.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Currently a lack of testing and limited access to data on the pandemic in crisis-affected countries in Africa has led to fears that the 'COVID response is fighting the epidemic in the dark', with widespread ramifications both within countries and around the globe. It is assumed that many low-income countries, particularly those affected by conflict, have many more cases than official numbers suggest. Given the under-testing in many cities, it is hard to fully understand the impact of the virus and the level of support required to combat it. When this assumption is coupled with the extant lack of data on numbers and locations of urban refugees, it is evident that more robust data collection is crucial.

One clear way for this to occur, as alluded to earlier in this paper, is for the governments of host countries to acknowledge the reality of urban refugees by allowing them to legally reside in urban areas per the 2009 revised UNHCR urban refugee policy, if that is not already allowed. This then paves the way for refugees to be included in urban censuses to provide regular snapshots into the number and types of city inhabitants. At the same time, there is an obvious need for better data collection on all inhabitants in many urban areas of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in secondary cities, where less data has historically been collected (Borel-Saladin 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic presents one, though by no means the only, challenge of limited data on populations. How can peak infection rates be estimated if the number of city inhabitants aren't known, for example? More optimistically, how can the number of needed vaccines in any given area be confirmed – and thus COVID-19 be contained – if refugees are not considered legal inhabitants to be included?

This research has highlighted a variety of remote research tools, including whatsapp and phone interviews, paper surveys, and SMS qualitative and quantitative data collection, that can support IGAD Member States and other actors in conducting research on refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic and in other similarly constrained contexts. In particular it acknowledges the importance of engaging refugee researchers and gatekeepers as co-researchers and collaborators in research on refugee populations. This is both ethically and practically important, and has the potential to greatly increase the breadth and quality of research. Refugee community organisations also offer important yet under-acknowledged pathways to accessing communities as well as sharing information from collected research.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and likely beyond, quasi-remote and creative forms of data collection will be needed to understand both the impact on refugees and their resulting needs. Identifying and improving effective modes of data collection that minimise risk to both researchers and informants, and which attend to power imbalances that may exist at both local and international scales, are crucial. Increasing data on urban refugees should represent a key area of focus to support the health, wellbeing, and dignity of not only refugees but all urban inhabitants and, indeed, cities as a whole.

## Recommendations

- Governments of refugee-hosting countries should **allow refugees to legally reside in all urban areas** per the 2009 revised UNHCR urban refugee policy. This offers an important foundation for badly needed data collection on urban inhabitants.
- **Include urban refugees in censuses** in order to better understand numbers and needs, and to ensure that central government and international funding to municipalities takes displaced inhabitants into account.
- **Collect more data and research on the locations of urban refugees**, in terms of size and type of city and town, and how these settings affect their lives, livelihoods, integration, etc.
- **Work with refugees as co-researchers and enumerators**, including through offering research training as needed.
- **Engage refugee community organisations as research partners** to enable (only ethical and consensual) access to refugee communities.
- **Conduct flexible research by obtaining information through as many channels as possible** to account for a variety of contexts refugees may be in (e.g. paper and online surveys, phone calls, whatsapp messages and voice notes).
  - Administering surveys via whatsapp, for example, increases the likelihood of contacting refugees who have either changed their phone number or left the country.
  - Whatsapp voice notes offers a format of interviewing not dependent on a stable internet connection (though strong internet is needed at some point to send messages).
  - Computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) can enable both small- and large-scale data collection to be quickly collated and analysed, and can be more systematic than other qualitative interviewing methods.

- Paper surveys, while slower to record and analyse, can reach informants without internet or phones, and remains an important method of research, although surveys recorded via tablets by interviewers can be much faster.
- Large-scale research, such as estimating populations, can be conducted fully remotely through remote sensing technology. However, ethical considerations surrounding consent remain.

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