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## Public Communication for Effective Service Delivery to Refugees in Uganda. The Case of Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

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Settlement.

This study argues that Public Communication in Refugee Settlements, when managed professionally and structurally with a deliberate open feedback mechanism for the end-users of services provided by the government and its development partners, could be a great tool for the evaluation and enhancement of public services provided in Refugee Settlements. The study analyses the education and health sectors as parameters for the government's service delivery in the case of the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. Taking a qualitative research methodology approach with the case of Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, the study found that the Uganda Refugees Act (2006), which authorises service provision by the government to the refugees, has no specific public communication strategy or policy clearly spelled as a communication framework to support service provision feedback. Therefore, the study recommends a direct public engagement communication strategy involving refugees and relevant stakeholders in the public service provision with the ultimate goal of improving service delivery at Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement.

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## INTRODUCTION

We define Public Communication in this study context as a means of dispersing information or messages to the Refugees by the government, and within the limitation of this study parameter, the government could mean the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) tasked with the responsibility of overseeing all activities related to the Refugees and working together with development partners supporting Refugees in Uganda. Ministry of Education and Sports, which manages the Education sector in the entire country, and the Ministry of Health oversees the Health sector in the entire country; in other words, this study tries to show how government communication may be directed to support effective service delivery to refugees at Kiryandongo Settlement.

Using communication to enhance service delivery in the government system is still being advanced by communication scholars since the role of communication in organisations has been undervalued in many entities and the government fares worst as regards this vice despite the massive scope of benefits associated with good communication practices and strategies (Cornelissen, 2020)

Communication and Public Relations scholars now contend that unlike in the past when communication and public Relations only had the core roles of defending and managing corporate reputation, nowadays, communication can play pivotal roles in service delivery (Carroll and Olegario, 2020; Fehrerand Bove., 2022). This school of thought also disagrees with the traditional notion that Public Communication or Public Relations is only for damage control and it has been a perspective that top management of most institutions is highly associated with since they would care about communication only when there is a crisis or to showcase success of what is achieved, loosely termed as 'for publicity effect' and cared less what communication could do in the long run as far as service delivery enhancement is concerned (Miller, 1999; Russell & Bishop, 2009).

Scholars have also argued that effective public communication can play a role in improving governance and the delivery of services to the vulnerable, including improving efficiency, accountability, and transparency and reducing bribery; for instance, Mtange (2022) contends that in Africa, investing in internal communication strategy is important in assisting the government institutions to accomplish each objective smoothly and effectively.

This paper adopts the philosophy that communication needs to be managed strategically and professionally to enhance the relationship between the Refugee community and the Public servants working in public or Government refugee institutions like the office of the prime minister. (Mbogo,2011) In this context, the Uganda Refugee Act (2006), under sections 8,29,32, empowers the Government of Uganda to provide services like public education, health, security, and identity, among others, to the refugee community. It is only through effective public communication that the government can audit its service delivery to refugees since a number of studies recognise the potential benefits of effective public relations (Kauzya, 2007; Ojok, & Kiwanuka, 2024).

### Study Background.

Uganda is globally appreciated for having one of the best Refugees Laws and Policies in place and hosting the most Refugees in the world (Bohnet, & Schmitz, 2019). This does not mean Uganda is not experiencing problems with hosting refugees (Ahimbisibwe, 2018). According to the validation of this study, the challenges include the implementation of the Refugee Policies. This study draws the Uganda Refugee Act (2006), which empowers the Government of Uganda to provide services like public education, health, security, and identity, among others, to the refugee community. Based on this brief background, the study tries to check the implementation of the Refugee Law as far as service delivery is concerned with a communication prism. Because the authors

believe communication or public relations can enhance or support service delivery.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a relevant administration to deal with the Refugees, but there are no deliberate efforts to get honest, transparent feedback from the refugee community on services being delivered to them (The Uganda Refugee Act, 2006).

In 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Uganda launched a communication system for refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda that was first piloted in Kiryandongo and Nakivale settlements known as the inter-agency toll-free lines which allows individual refugees to call the Office of the Prime Minister or development agency for a specific challenge they are facing.

This model is not inclusive and would not benefit a large refugee community for wider service delivery coverage audit. The Telephone toll-free line model does not comprehensively handle the issues of language barrier on the side of the receivers of the call and is very ineffective in case of health emergencies.

Therefore, this paper advances the notion that public communication with a clear communication feedback system could enhance service delivery at Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in Uganda.

### **Objective of the Study.**

The objective of the study was just to find out how Effective Public Communication can enhance service delivery at Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement taking the example of Health and Education Sectors at the settlement with a reflection on the sectors' challenges in service provision.

### **Methodology.**

The research deployed qualitative method sensitive to the inductive approach of qualitative study display of results and discussions in the investigation of how effective public communication can enhance government service

delivery, especially in the Health and Education sectors in the case of the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement found in Kiryandongo District. The study used in-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Key informant interviews were conducted with officials in the Office of the Prime Minister and Public service Providers in the Health and Education sectors within the settlement areas. Data was collected from 25 refugees between the age of 19 and 60 years of age for both in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions. Four (4) health workers and four teaching staff (4) were also strategically selected at the headship and operational level for the study.

Apart from the secondary data, this study also benefited from data collected by the first author in 2022 when he was a Youth for Policy Migration (Y4P) fellow with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Uganda and South Sudan. Therefore, the study should not be over-generalised for all Refugee Settlements in Uganda.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Education Service Provision Sector Findings**

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement has 14 Early Childhood Development Centres (ECD) and 9 primary schools, where 7 are Governmental, namely; Bidong, Can-rom, Panyadoli Hill, Victoria, Ematong, Saint Bakhita, Arnold and two others supported by partners or community members while most of the primary schools concurrently run the Early Childhood Development Centre (ECD).

The Refugee Settlement also has two secondary schools, one of which is a government one. (Panyadoli Self-Help Secondary School). These schools serve both the refugee communities and the host communities (Ugandan nationals) because all of them, before the Government or Ministry of Education and Sports took them by coding, had all started as community schools by the Refugees or the host communities in their formation background.

### **Challenges analysis in the education service provision**

The study found that there are inadequate classroom blocks compared to the number of pupils in the primary schools in the settlement area. This also applies to Panyadoli Self-Help Secondary School, the only public secondary school in the settlement area. The study revealed that many of the teachers are supported by development agencies like Windle Trust, UNHCR, and others, and there are few teachers on the government payroll. In-depth interviews with some of the teaching staff revealed that there has been laxity in recruiting more teachers on the government payroll due to ceiling issues and rhetoric that the majority of the learners are refugees capable of development partners' support, hence posting teachers in other schools out of the settlement area with more nationals has been prioritised.

Take the example of Arnold Primary School, one of the biggest government schools as of 21<sup>st</sup> October 2022. The enrolment was at 3,685 pupils, with only 59 teachers in total. 7 teachers are on the government payroll, 3 are supported by UNHCR, 49 by Windle Trust International Uganda. Educational sector data provided by OPM revealed that the pupil's teacher ratio stands at 1:53. 308 more teachers need to be recruited for the primary school and 17 for the secondary school, with over 369 classrooms needed for both primary and secondary schools.

Here, we argue that the school shall remain the property of the Government of Uganda and there is a need for ownership; hence, the government should, through Kiryandongo District Service Commission, invest in adding more teachers as a government contribution directly in the education sector.

The nationals also study in these schools, and for better feedback, the parents feel they could communicate directly with the education service providers about how their children suffer by trying to listen and understand lessons in inadequate classrooms.

The study also found that refugee students have to pay for Uganda Certificate of Examination (UCE)

and Uganda Advance Certificate of Examination (UACE) fees when the Ugandan students (nationals) don't pay any examination fees because the school is benefitting from Universal Secondary Education (USE) scholarship from Government of Uganda.

The study validated the assertion from the school authority, who said they have long alerted the Ministry of Education and Sports about the challenges, although it has not yet been rectified. The refugee students will have to pay UGX 164,000 for UCE and UGX 186,000 for UACE since the Uganda National Examination Board (UNEB) system only recognises nationals for schools benefitting from Universal Secondary Education.

This becomes a communication challenge because the refugee's parents, since 2018, when the government took the school under Universal Secondary Education (USE), have never gotten any feedback on why their children are discriminated against at Panyadoli Self Help Secondary school during UCE and UACE.

*"This is very unfair; we hope that the Government addresses this educational discrimination because now we are under them and deserve the same treatment as Ugandan citizens"* (Key-informant interview, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, October 2022).

We also, under this finding, assert that it contravenes Articles 29 and 32 of the Refugee Act about the same rights to education as Ugandans, but with engaging public communication strategy like open refugee community dialogue directly with the Ministry of Education officials, this problem could have been long cured. This finding also reinforces the relevance of having community dialogue as a multiplicity approach to communication to enhance service delivery. Mostly, it advocates for action response to a found problem to reactivate the true relevance of using communication to support service delivery (Grunig, 1992; Ojok, & Kiwanuka, 2024).



### Effective Communication to Strengthen Health Service Provision

The Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement have three health units, which are all Government health centres. Of the three, 2 are Health Centres IIIs, and one is Health Centre IV. This is due to the Ministry of Health Policy that supported the elevation of Health Centre IIs to Health Centre IIIs and in July 2022 the Health Centre III was upgraded to Health Centre IV to provide services to the Refugees and the host Communities in Kiryandongo District. The settlement also has five ambulances on standby for referrals and emergencies.

#### *Analysis of the Communication and Health Services Provision Nexus*

The study found drug stock out at the health facilities as a big challenge to the refugee community and focus group discussions revealed that refugees experience slow patient handling while expectant mothers say getting a midwife to attend to also is not easy in the Panyadoli Health Centre IV.

The study found that Panyadoli Health Centre IV serves both the nationals and refugees, and according to the findings, the number of nationals at times outweighs the number of refugees visiting the health units. For instance, in the month of August 2022, the Health Centre IV had 219 deliveries, 74 were from refugees and 145 were from Ugandan nationals, with a total of 8 daily average deliveries, according to the interview with senior clinicians at the health unit.

The Health Centre officials also revealed that they have 330 outpatient visits to the Health Centre IV on average daily. This was an extract from one of the senior clinicians during an in-depth interview following up on the slow service for refugees at the health unit.

*‘Imagine in the month of July, August and September 2022, we had a total of 1,053 child deliveries with 16 enrolled midwives and a clinician attending to about 64 patients per day for consultation, so you can see the heavy patient burden we have and slow services is*

*inevitable’* (Key-informant interview, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, October 2022).

Another senior medical officer raised the issue of staffing regarding this extract.

*“We also hope Kiryandongo District officials and the Ministry of Health support us in recruiting more health workers who would be on government payroll because we currently only have 16 staff on government payroll out of the total 131 staff; the others, of course, are being paid by development partners but a busy health centre IV like this should have 48 health workers fully accommodated and on government payroll for sustainability and hope of real growth”* (Key-informant interview, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, October 2022).

The study validated even from the refugees that there are over 20,000 unregistered refugees at the settlements, as some had followed their spouses, relatives, and parents at the settlement when registration was stopped. This has a heavy burden on services offered at the settlement for refugees.

This is an extract from a participant reacting to issues of the unregistered Refugees in the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement.

*“OPM said that if they want to be registered, they should go to Lamwo in the Refugee Settlement, but why would they want to separate me from my wife and children during service provision? I want to stay with them here, can’t they just register them from here?”* (FGD, October 2022, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement)

These Health provision service challenges show poor communication engagement between the stakeholders and refugee community; hence, we advise that having a communication desk with professional communication officers with all this information pertaining to service delivery challenges and what is being done could help to cure some of these worries.

### **Strengthening Existing Communication Channels**

**Radio Communication:** the refugees revealed that the Office of the Prime Minister and other development partners normally use the local Radios within the Kiryandongo district to communicate to the refugee community because of a clear reach, and that includes Kibanda FM, VCC FM and Kiryandongo FM.

An extract from one of the respondents noted that the use of Radio has been very effective.

*“The Radio Stations use has been effective in communicating messages to do with immunisation of children and sensitising people on health matters within the settlement here”* (Key informant interview, October 2022, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement)

This study also recognises Radio as a good channel but needs to be supplemented with a refugee communication desk at the settlement for referrals and the provision of a feedback mechanism that is missing in the communication set-up at Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. Having no communication desk could also be a danger to press management.

*“ Because we have no in-house professional communication reference desks even for services here, when journalists come during any function, we just end up speaking anything that at times annoys other partners and the consequence is that you might be left out next time”* (FGD, October 2022, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement).

**Refugee Welfare Council:** The Kiryandongo refugee settlement also has the Refugee Welfare Council leaders, who are the leaders of refugees and are the biggest communication intermediaries between the refugees and the public stakeholders at the settlements. The settlement has 17 clusters, with each leader per cluster.

Most of the communications within the settlements are passed through these leaders, and many respondents to the study assert that, in most

cases, the leaders are ineffective and don't communicate with the zone members.

*“In most cases, they just enjoy workshops and rarely communicate to us even though we don't know if they really present our issues in those meetings because the problems are still the same”* (FGD Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, October 2022).

We still note that the communication desk is the remedy to this gap, as all workshops and meetings in relation to refugees' issues would be recorded and could be accessed by refugees from the communication desk as the core alternatives to the Refugee Welfare Council members.

The study also noted recruitment of most language speakers at strategic service points in the settlement area should be encouraged as a cure to language barriers for access to services such as health and education, among others.

However, any system that values communication to enhance service delivery should ensure there are open communication platforms for the public on the services being offered for proper review and improvement on the services as to the complaints by the users (Verčič et al., 2013).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The Government of Uganda, through the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Disaster and Preparedness and Refugees, have an obligatory mandate enshrined in the Refugees Act (2006) in relation to public service provision to the refugee communities in Uganda. The Act has no specific public communication strategy or policy clearly spelt to support the service provision feedback from refugees for continuous improvement.

Although from the practice at Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, this study found that the traditional press agency, public information model or strategy is largely used at the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. This is one-way communication characterised by an unidentified flow of information from the government and its development partners to the

refugees, which could be highly hazardous in cases of crisis in communication at the settlement area and, worst of all, has no strategic communication feedback mechanism for review of services to deliver as promised in the refugee law.

Therefore, this study conclusively believes in Public Communication or Public Relations as a service delivery tool and if the government and its Development partners (Service Providers) allow Refugees (Service- Receivers) to audit the services they receive from them by deliberately creating a conducive environment for feedback provision like putting up communication desk and encouraging public dialogues involving with big fish Service Providers at the level of Ministers, Permanent Secretaries at worst twice a year. In comparison to over-reliance on the Refugee Welfare Council, this study agrees that Public Communication would create effective service delivery to Refugees in Uganda.

### Recommendation

**Develop Refugee Communication Policy:** The Government of Uganda, through the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Disaster and Preparedness and Refugees, should develop a clear framework showing communication flow between the government, its development partners and the refugees with the empowerment of a communication desk. This would cure the uncoordinated flow of information and secure proper press management at the settlement areas.

**Develop biannual Public Information Accountability Forums:** The public information accountability forum brings all the service providers before the community, and refugees would engage with the top officers who could act faster to supplement reports from the refugee settlement commandant that could take months to reach a Minister or a Permanent Secretary.

This forum would also help the government at a high level to evaluate the services they are offering to refugees and see where to improve, including creating awareness of the Uganda Refugee Act (2006) to Government Ministries

that might not have embedded the Act into its programming, like UNEB system not recognising refugee's students to benefit from USE contravenes article 29 and 32 of the Refugee Act.

**Periodic Mandatory training for the Refugee Welfare Council (RWCs):** This study recommends that every cluster leader in the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement needs to be taken for engaging public communication training focusing deeply on the feedback mechanism as the best tool of communication. This would empower them to begin initiating internal open dialogues on service provision as a gateway to the public information accountability forums. This would create interactive and free information sharing within the clusters, limiting doubt and feelings of despair among the refugees.

Finally, this study recommends that further communication research on the enhancement of service delivery should be sampled in three or more Refugee Settlements in Uganda to get a countrywide overview for concrete planning of communication as a tool to enhance service delivery in Refugee Settlements in the country.

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