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Original Article

South Sudanese Refugee Higher Education Access in Uganda: An Intersectionality Enquiry

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This study was guided by the intersectionality theory, originally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. According to Crenshaw, the theory assumes that people have multiple biological, social and cultural identity markers that intersect, resulting in experiences of privilege or disadvantage, inclusion or discrimination. However, the theory maintains that marginalized individuals are not homogeneous and they experience discrimination and inclusion in different ways. The intersectionality theory also recognizes power dynamics and how structural, political and representational domains, intersect and produce complex patterns of discrimination, inequality and disadvantage. Ultimately, the intersectionality theory asserts that effective activism and social change require recognizing and addressing the intersections of various forms of oppression, and advocating for justice across multiple fronts. This exposes discrimination and exclusion that would have otherwise gone unnoticed, also giving voice to the disadvantaged and excluded. The study adopted a qualitative approach, an exploratory case study design, and an advocacy/ participatory philosophical lens. Twenty-seven purposively sampled participants took part in the study. They included 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 higher education. Data was collected through a literature review, in-depth interviews with key informants and students, and a students' focus group discussion. The study established that higher education access for South Sudanese refugees in Uganda involves multiple intersectional prohibitive and also supportive factors. The study therefore recommends that through situational analysis and needs assessment, Uganda develops clear objectives, activities and outcomes in the Education Response Plan, to establish the divergent supportive and prohibitive factors and cater for the various refugee student needs. The study also designed the refugee access and resilience (RARE) model to assist in the aforementioned regard.

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INTRODUCTION

When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released the 2012-2016 education strategy in 2012, it underscored higher education access for refugees as a priority (UNHCR, 2012). Relatedly, UNHCR set the 15by30 target, whereby 15 percent of refugees should access higher education by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019). In Uganda's refugee context, some effort has been made towards enhancing refugee higher education access, including within the parameters of the Education Response Plan (ERP) for refugees and host communities (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2018). For instance, support from the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) and other partners, is extended to students in refugee settlements (Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023). Additionally, Gallagher and Bauer (2020) note that refugees at higher education level receive digital literacy support programmes. Refugees at higher education level also receive in-settlement and institutional level support, to foster their higher education access and enable them stay the course (Gallagher & Bauer, 2020; Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023). However, despite the aforementioned efforts and support, refugee access to higher education in Uganda, including higher education for South Sudanese refugees from Bidi Bidi settlement, has remained low, owing to various intersectional and often mutually reinforcing factors (Hakami, 2016; Kimoga et al., 2015; Nambi et al., 2023; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023; Tulibaleka, 2022). Among the disabling intersectional factors cited by previous studies are a high refugee population of pre-primary and primary school-going age; lack of government funds; donor preference for

basic education and short-term humanitarian interventions; the high cost of higher education, amid low donor funding and inconsistent funding cycles (MoES, 2018; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023). Studies have also reported gaps in refugee students' resilience evidenced by instances of refugee student stigmatization, exclusion and ethnic profiling by some students and even some members of staff at the universities (Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; Tulibaleka, 2022). Existing literature reveals that the intersectionality theory as established by Crenshaw (1989) can be highly relevant to unveiling varied and often intersecting and mutually reinforcing factors that influence higher education access for refugees, (Connor, 2006; Gasdalis & Madva, 2020; Harðardóttir et al., 2019; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023).

Therefore, in line with the intersectionality theory and based on the study findings, this paper outlines the support that the South Sudanese refugee students from Bidi Bidi settlement are accorded, as well as the intersectional challenges they face, in order to access higher education in Uganda. This paper goes further and makes some recommendations that can contribute towards addressing the intersectional challenges that the South Sudanese refugees face, when accessing higher education in Uganda. Additionally, the paper introduces the refugee access and resilience (RARE) model, which can contribute towards more tailor-made support for South Sudanese refugees from Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. Given that it is based on the precepts of the global UNHCR Education Strategy 2012-2016, the RARE model can also guide refugee access interventions and innovations beyond Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda.

LITERATURE REVIEW, PHILOSOPHY AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Globally, among the factors that affect refugee higher education access are: legislation and policy; bureaucracy; resource capacity; institutional contexts; community beliefs and attitudes; lack of accurate data; circumstances the refugees encounter as they flee conflict; historical resettlement patterns; linguistic differences, and discrimination in host countries (Nwosu, 2014; Walton et al., 2020). On the other hand, access can be fostered through legislation and policy assemblages, the community and educational institutions (Detroube, 2018; Nwosu, 2014). Existing evidence also indicates that in light of the United Nation's human rights treaty bodies, intersectionality is a "basic concept for understanding the scope of the general obligations of states parties" (Chow, 2016, p. 454). Furthermore, in refugee education, intersectionality helps in looking at where and how several factors intersect to include or exclude refugees, right from the global level (Cohen, et al., 2022; Robert & Yu, 2018; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023).

Factors that influence refugee higher education access in SSA in context of the 15by30

Refugees in Ethiopia are caught up between the state, universities and their various identities and needs. For refugees of Eritrean origin, access is enhanced through free university scholarships, at various Ethiopian public universities (Tamrat, 2020). The leading agency in refugee protection and coordination in Ethiopia, the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), creates various beneficial opportunities for refugees (Tamrat, 2020). For instance, ARRA makes arrangements for special examinations for students who cannot produce authentic documents, by sending a letter of cooperation to the higher education institution (HEI), where they intend to study (Tamrat, 2020). The author goes on to note that the ARRA also urges the HEIs to accord the refugees access, under the same conditions as nationals and charge them fees in local currency. In Uganda, some settlement-based

refugees benefit from scholarships like the DAFI scholarship, through local organizations like Windle Trust (Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2018; Woldegiorgis, & Monari, 2023). These scholarships however mainly benefit refugees who have completed secondary school education in Uganda and who have good command of English (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018; Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023). In light of the language needs, in the Republic of South Africa (RSA), Maringe et al. (2017) mention a university that has a sponsored language school that supports international students, including refugees, to build language and linguistic competences required to undertake degree studies. Similarly, UNHCR (2018) reiterates that individual DAFI country programmes offer needs-based language lessons, bridging programmes, information, communication and technology (ICT) training, that aid higher education access. For instance, in Rwanda, UNHCR collaborated with a local partner, to implement the *Iteme* (for bridge in Kinyarwanda) programme, which was designed to support refugees to transition from secondary to higher education (UNHCR, 2018).

Existing literature suggests that while national policies, plans and initiatives can have positive influence on refugee students' higher education access, refugees also face some intersecting challenges in accessing higher education (Baker et al., 2019; Dare & Abebe, 2018; Denaro & Guiffre, 2022; Devereux, 2017; Dewulf et. 2020, 2019; Donald, 2014; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018; Gateley, 2016; Hall, 2015; International Rescue Committee, [IRC] 2019; McMonagle, 2017; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023). Some studies assert that the influence of policies and plans on refugee higher education access can be hampered by various situational and normative complexities (Baker et al., 2019; Hathaway, 2018; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023).

Hathaway (2018) and Masaku (2019) postulate that the absence of binding global policy, meaningful responsibility sharing, and clear mechanism for compliance, constitute a significant impediment to the practical application

of national policies and (response) plans. Moreover, the commitments of responsibility sharing, by the countries in the global north, towards supporting higher education for refugees, are largely discretionary (Betts, 2018). For example, Dewulf et al. (2020) asserts that in Chad, in general, education is not prioritized by the international community and donors, leading to consistent underfunding for the sector and limited actors intervening in education. Furthermore, the foregoing authors assert that overall, the budget for education is the least funded among all the refugee response sectors (Dewulf et al., 2020). Yet as Masuku (2020) observes, states tend to want to safeguard their own interests (political, economic and ideological) ahead of the refugees' needs.

Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC] (2022) states that in Uganda, large refugee influxes and the incessant funding shortfalls have negatively impacted national services and systems are severely overstretched. "Increasingly limited funding has had an important impact on humanitarian organisations' operations and pushed them to make difficult decisions, such as cutting back support in certain areas...focusing primarily on the most vulnerable people" (NRC, 2022, p2). Crawford and O'Callaghan (2019) further assert that UNHCR's operations in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda remain "precarious and perennially underfunded" (Crawford & O'Callaghan, 2019, p.4). Evidence further exists that in 2019, Uganda's integrated refugee response plan had only received 20 percent of its budgetary requirements (Crawford & O'Callaghan, 2019). Moreover development funding 'pales' in comparison to annual humanitarian budgets and donor funding is often short-term and unpredictable, yet many refugees end up in protracted situations (Baker et al., 2019; Crawford & O'Callaghan, 2019). Relatedly, the opportunities that exist are only limited to a lucky few (Baker et al., 2019). Furthermore, higher education for refugees has not received as much attention, as primary and secondary education, either from the humanitarian agencies, or from the donors (Avery & Said, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et

al., 2018; McCann, 2017; Semambo-Sempebwa, 2023).

Further evidence reveals that in addition to the above often intersecting complexities, there are also capacity constraints in line ministries and local structures, in the host countries, and refugees are often hosted in the border areas where host communities are already struggling to build sustenance and livelihoods (Baker et al., 2019). Furthermore, McMonagle (2017) states that as a result of large-scale refugee arrivals, already strained national health and education infrastructure and systems, are put under even more pressure. Dryden-Peterson et al. (2018) aver that when the already struggling countries have to share resources between refugees and host communities, within already fragile settings, this leads to tensions between refugees and host communities. Hall (2015) states that host communities resent that they have to shoulder the burden of refugee health and education services, yet the host communities too are poorly served.

Kavuro (2010) points out that refugees are often subjected to what he refers to as "unfair discrimination" being treated like international students, and expected to be self-reliant and affirm that they will be able to pay university fees. Refugees in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) face the additional hurdle, associated with evaluating their qualifications (Kavuro, 2010). Yet, apart from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, no other university in the Western Cape offers services of evaluating foreign qualifications (Kavuro, 2010). Where refugees are supported by the Cape Town Refugee Centre, to have their qualifications evaluated, they have to meet the cost (Kavuro, 2010). The author further avers that refugees are excluded from accessing national resources, yet they are not allocated any alternative funding to promote favourable access to higher education. Bursaries and scholarships for refugee students are competitive and benefit only a few, and unfortunately, while the law allows refugee students to work a certain number of hours per week, refugee students cited experiences of rampant discrimination and

disinterest, once their refugee status was disclosed (Maringe et al., 2017).

Amid the intersecting complexities that surround higher education access for refugees, Denaro and Guiffre (2022) note that there is incomprehensive reporting on refugees in the voluntary national reports, even in major refugee-hosting countries (Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda, Germany, Sudan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Ethiopia). Congruently, while partners in Uganda largely demonstrate compliance with the ERP's reporting requirements and submit data on their activities, particularly in refugee communities, sometimes there is irregular and insufficient reporting (Brown et al., 2020). Relatedly, Brown et al. (2020) aver that in Uganda, there is need to include indicators on refugees, in the national education management information system (EMIS), in order to uncover the actual situation and help identify needs and funding gaps.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach, which is best suited to provide an in-depth investigation of lived experiences of the marginalized using the multiple perspectives of key actors (Creswell, 2013). The study used the exploratory case study design, which helped to provide insight into the different intersectional factors that influence refugee students' higher education access (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Purposive sampling was used, to identify and select 27 people from national, district and settlement levels. These comprised 7 government officials, 5 NGO officials, 1 representative from an Education in Emergencies (EiE) working group, 2 HEI officials, and 12 South Sudanese students (18-34) from Bidi Bidi settlement, enrolled at a university. In deciding the sample size, it was taken into consideration that 12 to 15 participants can provide multiple perspectives, while using additional data sources to support the findings (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Data was collected 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 (FGD) with students, conducted from June to September 2022. This resulted in diverse perspectives, also enabling triangulation, credibility and transferability (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). Transferability was further enhanced by providing detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the context, sources, data collection and analysis process and findings. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was ascertained through documenting the study process in a logical, traceable, and clearly documented manner (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Data analysis

In keeping with Creswell (2013), the study applied priori and emergent thematic coding. Initially seven topic codes which aligned with the study purpose and questions were identified. By the end of the line-by-line analysis, these initial seven codes had expanded into 14 codes. In addition to the manual line-by-line analysis and generated codes and memos, NVivo 12 analysis was applied. Since NVivo clusters participants and their viewpoints under codes, it became easy to identify similarities and differences within the codes. It is out of these extended codes that the main theme and sub-themes under which the study findings are discussed, were generated.

Ethical considerations

The study was given clearance by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM); the AIDS Support Organization (TASO) research ethics committee (REC), reference number TASO-2021-69, and by Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST), reference number SS1186ES. A letter of introduction was obtained from the College of Education and External Studies, East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, Makerere University. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each participant was assigned a letter and a number, with the letters N, D, and S, denoting national, district, or settlement for key informants (KIs). For students, FGD or IDI were added to their numbers, to denote focus group discussion or in-depth interview. Before enrolment into the study,

eligible participants were informed about the aims of the study, the potential length of the interview, and their discretion to participate or withdraw at any time. Participants were assured that all information obtained from them would be kept confidential. Finally, they all gave their verbal and written informed consent.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The intersectional supportive factors as well as the challenges that influence higher education access of South Sudanese refugee students from Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda, are presented in the sections that follow, under four themes.

Intersecting supra-national and national frameworks

In Uganda, higher education access for South Sudanese refugee students from Bidi Bidi settlement falls under the national ERP which lacks details on higher education. Thus, it ultimately aligns with and draws upon supra-national policy. This can aid but also disadvantage higher education access, as highlighted below.

GKIN 2, from a government ministry noted that:

When you look at the ERP you find that it is very silent on higher education because it was initially developed as a guide to look at the system and coordinate other initiatives and see how they are going. We however have components within existing policy that have provisions for higher education, which anyone can draw upon. (GKIN 2, 2022)

GKIN 2 went further and noted the following.

We already have global commitments...when I am lobbying for resources or trying to negotiate with an Embassy for resources for higher education for refugees, then I will be able to mention what supportive global and regional documents we have in place. That will be my basis for negotiating for resources, saying in Uganda, we ratified this or the other. (GKIN 2, 2022)

From the foregoing extracts, GKIN 2, seemed to suggest that higher education access for refugees is not influenced by just the national ERP but

draws upon documents at supra-national level, which are co-constitutive, and also mutually reinforcing. Thus her suggestion that these global and regional documents, which already include higher education for refugees, can be used to aid access, for instance through resource mobilization. Relatedly, GKIN 5, pointed out that:

When we were developing the national education response plan for refugees and host communities, we tried to align it to the National Development Plan III. The ERP brings together all the national education interventions that include refugees and aligns with national policy frameworks, as well as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). (GKIN 5, 2022)

In consonance with the above, NGKIN 3, revealed that even the DAFI scholarship in Uganda was implemented according to the international DAFI guidelines. Conversely, GKIS 1 shed light on how drawing upon broader policy frameworks tended to marginalize higher education in the ERP.

Actually the UN Convention requires us to give basic education up to senior six, but from senior six, there is no arranged programme to aid access to university. That programme is not there. What we have in the settlement are vocational schools. Those who finish senior six or senior four, they can enrol in these vocational schools that we have and proceed with their studies. For those who want to enrol in university, they have to meet their own costs. Partners usually come in but the support for higher education is very little. (GKIS 1, 2022)

Furthermore, GKIS 2 suggested that refugee higher education access was disadvantaged even further in that national policy was at times generalized.

We manage refugee education under the Refugee Act 2006 as well as the Refugee Regulations 2010. Within the Refugee Regulations 2010, there is a section that talks about education. It says that free education should be provided to the refugees, but it does not specify a specific level. It talks of free

education to refugees generally, using the relevant laws of the country, like the Education Act of 2008. (GKIS 2, 2022)

Affirming the interlocking and mutually reinforcing nature of supra-national and national frameworks, the UNHCR 2012-2016 Education Strategy emphasizes that it was important to contextualize the Strategy, to suit each country's local context.

While it is global in nature, the strategic objectives, expected results, and indicators of achievement have been written to apply to the country-level...these indicators will be further contextualized in each country through the development of country-level strategies and implementation plans. (UNHCR, 2012, p. 9)

Additionally, the UNHCR Education Strategy further notes that there is need to undertake situational analyses in the context of the particular Country dynamics, in order to support decisions on education planning and programmes (UNHCR, 2012). Finally, both the UNHCR Education Strategy and the CRRF assert there is need for consultation with refugees in order to determine the most appropriate approach to refugee education in each context (UN General Assembly, 2018a; UNHCR, 2012).

The whole of society, multi-stakeholder/partnership approach

In Uganda, various stakeholders work together to aid refugees' higher education access and are involved in the decision-making processes. NGKIN 2 shared the following:

The Office of the Prime Minister, OPM, and UNHCR are involved in higher education policy formulation, because they regulate all refugee response. Finn Church Aid and Windle International, come in as the main implementing partners of UNHCR, in the delivery of education services for refugees. From the district education office, the District Education Officer and inspectors of schools are consulted. As implementing partners, we are always consulted on matters of education,

even higher education and we present our views. (NGKIN 2, 2022)

Along the same lines, SIDI 1, a student had the following to say.

Okay, basically on our side for higher education, it is Windle. Windle pays our fees to universities in Uganda but they can even give the other scholarship that takes students like abroad. There is also Finn Church Aid. Finn Church Aid has its own scholarship which also takes refugees all the way from secondary school to higher education. There are students sponsored by Finn Church Aid in Uganda Christian University, but I have not seen them in the university where I am. Those are the major higher education sponsors in Bidi Bidi. (SIDI 1, 2022)

Another student noted that during the scholarship interview and selection process, there was involvement of many stakeholders whose views were solicited by Windle International.

UNHCR comes up with a selection procedure, which looks at several things. Then there is an interview team. There is a representative from Office of the Prime Minister, a representative from the Refugee Welfare Council (RWC) of the settlement, and then other agencies also involved in education. Yes Police are also there. For interviews, Windle will call all of those selected in one place. We come and sit and go one by one and the interview is between five and ten minutes. After the interview, then they will go and ask more about what you are doing, especially in the community. (SFGD 7, 2022).

Situational factors and cross-cutting issues

Among the key factors that intersect with refugee higher education access is the refugee demographics and related issues. GKIN 1, a national level participant from a government ministry pointed out that:

When you look at the composition of the refugees, the majority are children and women. When it comes to children, most of

them are of school-going age, with a big percentage falling in the primary and pre-primary age category. So as a matter of priority, the Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities tends to focus on basic education. (GKIN 1, 2022)

Some of the students concurred that they come from large families, which are poor, with some citing additional problems such as negligent parents or arriving in Uganda as unescorted minors and fending for themselves (SFGD 3; SFGD 4; SFGD 5; SIDI 2; SIDI 3). These factors have negative implications for higher education access. Along similar lines NGKIN 1 made the following observation:

The high refugee population puts huge pressure on the local actors. So there is a huge need at the primary school level. This pressure is already seen through the numbers that do not transition from primary to secondary level. So it is more likely that transitioning from secondary to post-secondary will be even more difficult, due to the high number of refugees. (NGKIN 1, 2022).

The influence of refugee demographics on higher education access was further revealed by NGKIN 2 who affirmed thus, “Our programmes focus on the women and children, since at the end of the day, they are the primary caregivers and children need most care” (NGKIN 2, 2022). Relatedly, GKIN 5 asserted that:

When we were developing the ERP, the Education in Emergencies partners discussed higher education. However, because donors are more interested in funding basic education, higher education is not pronounced in the ERP. The ERP does not even have an objective or activities for higher education. Even if the ERP does not talk about university education, there are donors like MasterCard Foundation, coming up with scholarships through UNHCR. (GKIN 5, 2022)

In addition to refugee demographics and donor preference for basic education, other factors that

come into play and influence refugees’ higher education access are its perceived minimal returns, in addition to being expensive (GKIN 2). GKIN 3 adds that “donor support is uncertain, some come for just one or two years. Then government ends up with the challenge of finding ways to support refugee higher education. Therefore, refugee higher education is not well-funded and it is not well-followed up” (GKIN 3, 2022; NGKIN 2, 2022). In addition to the above interlocking complexities, there is also the twist of focussing on the humanitarian as opposed to the development interventions, during refugee response. GKIN 1 submitted that “Funding towards refugee response mainly focuses on humanitarian aspects such as: psychosocial support, training, and also some research and monitoring and evaluation. The long-term development, where higher education falls, is not well funded” (GKIN 1, 2022).

There were also suggestions that downstream issues such as poor infrastructure, high student to teacher ratios and poor transition rates, all ultimately influenced refugee higher education access (NGKIS 1, 2022; SIDI 1; SIDI 2).

Some students went further and noted that when applying for scholarships, they faced challenges filling in online registration forms, owing to intermittent internet access, as well as lack of smartphones (SFGD 1; SIDI 1; SIDI 2; SIDI 4). They also decried the distances and hidden costs that come with the scholarship application and interview processes (SFGD 1; SIDI 1; SIDI 2; SIDI 4). While another student said that students who did not complete secondary school in Uganda have to have their qualifications equated and ultimately they join the education system at a lower level (SFGD 5).

It was also noted that cross-cutting issues such as gender, age, culture, location and disability influence refugees’ higher education access. For instance, it was asserted that “Parents don’t value education, especially for the girl-child, mainly because of their culture” (GKIN 3, 2022). It was further observed that “Gender affects both males and females. However, the culture and tradition where the refugees come from affects the girls

more. Even with focus on girl-child education, a gender study we conducted indicates that girls are more disadvantaged” (NGKIN 1, 2022). Similarly, the following observation was made:

There is also need for flexibility with the age limit, as there may be people eligible for higher education access, who are barred by the age limit. The age limit is likely to affect females more than males, especially since more females have family obligations. (GKIN 2, 2022)

Still with regard to gender and culture, it was further averred that:

Owing to the culture of refugees, by teen age, many girls have dropped out of school. This especially affects girls who should be transitioning to secondary school. This decline in the number of girls who make it through to secondary and higher levels is supported by research. (NGKIN 2, 2022).

Thus it was revealed by one participant that “For example, when we advertise tertiary scholarships, almost 70 percent target girls (NGKIN 2, 2022). However, it was also observed thus:

There was a time we got support, of 23 scholarship opportunities for girls only, from donors in the United States. When we put the advert out, we were not able to get the 23 girls. When we failed to raise that number of girls from the target settlement, we had to extend the call for applications to Rhino Camp settlement. This shows you that the challenges the girls face hinder them from benefitting from affirmative action, to aid access at higher education level. (NGKIN 2, 2022).

Multiple supportive pathways toward refugee higher education access

Despite the aforementioned situational factors and cross-cutting issues, it was established that nevertheless, there are multiple pathways that support refugees’ higher education access. Among the support mentioned were settlement-based bridging programmes, which target potential higher education scholarship

beneficiaries (GKIN 5, 2022). However, though they are very beneficial and they are well publicized, the bridging programmes can only enrol a few students.

It was also noted that private universities admit a lot of the refugee students, since their calendars are more flexible and are more aligned with the various calls for higher education scholarships (GKIN 2, 2022). However, there are some instances where the private universities treat the refugees like international students and charge them university fees in United States dollars (GKIN 2; HEIKIN 1, 2022). Even then, it was noted that government, through the Office of the Prime minister (OPM), writes to public universities and some private universities, requesting them to charge refugees as nationals.

The procedure is that refugees write to this office in OPM. In turn, OPM recommends them to register as nationals but that is in national universities. The waiver also applies to a few selected private universities. Other universities have not waived international student requirements for refugees and so university education remains very expensive (GKIN 3, 2022).

Nonetheless, under the UNHCR DAFI scholarship programme, which is administered by one of the NGO partners, “Students can go to all government and private institutions within the country” (NGKIN 3, 2022). Interestingly, it was noted that not all refugees required external support at university level. “Just as I managed to pay for my education, there are refugees who are able to pay” (NGKIN 2, 2022). Nonetheless, HEIKIN 1 affirmed that, “The moment they bring this letter from the Prime Minister’s Office, they pay the same university rates as Ugandans. Yes. Organizations like Windle International also come in to give a hand” (HEIKIN 1, 2022). Some students can get admission to university to pursue a degree, if they have a diploma, instead of going through high school (SIDI 3). Additionally, it was posited that “Students also get Information Communication and Technology (ICT) training as well as career guidance and counselling, so that

once they are awarded a scholarship, they don't drop out" (GKID 1, 2022).

However, it was noted that the scholarship opportunities, though widely advertised are few and do not match the need (HEIKIN 1; HEIKIN 2; NGKIS 2; SIDI 1). As a result, one participant proposed that the government could think about creating some district quota slots for refugees, and add on to what Windle International is doing (GKIS 2). This was in addition to suggestions of getting some organizations to lobby UNHCR to expand scholarship support, and perhaps convincing government to create more scholarship opportunities (GKIS 1, 2022). Finally, it was proposed that government and the education partners could integrate the district quota and refugee scholarships and treat them as one (GKIS 1, 2022).

DISCUSSION

The findings from the study are discussed below under the same themes that they are presented above.

Intersecting supra-national and national frameworks

The findings indicate that in light of higher education, the ERP is not detailed enough and thus draws upon supra-national and some of the general national policies, in order to aid access. However, it was also disclosed that within this context, the international policy, such as the UN Convention on the rights of the child tends to favour basic education. The findings indicate that higher education access for refugees is further disadvantaged by national policy which is generalized and does not necessarily make specific reference to higher education. For instance, when it is mentioned that education for refugees should be free, it is left to the donors to decide at what level to support access to free education. Indeed there is evidence that national policy intersects with and is informed by supra-national policy. However, it is also clear that the UNHCR Strategy calls upon host countries to ensure they have clear national tailor-made strategic objectives, expected results and indicators. The foregoing findings of national

policy intersecting with and drawing upon supra-national policy are in line with the work of Baker et al. (2019), Chow (2016) and Dewulf et al. (2020). Moreover Chow (2016) avers that UN human rights treaty bodies can best be understood through applying intersectionality.

The whole of society, multi-stakeholder/partnership approach

Evidence was adduced that in delivering support towards higher education access for refugees, various stakeholders work together through a multi-stakeholder/ partnership, whole-of-society approach. Under this approach, the roles of the various partners often intersect as they work towards fostering refugees' higher education access. For instance, OPM and UNHCR are involved in policy formulation but at the same time regulate all refugee response and interact with stakeholders that support higher education access. Windle International and Finn Church Aid handle education response and scholarships and thus interact with UNHCR, OPM and the universities in Uganda. The RWCs, Police, and other education partners get involved in various higher education activities, whereas the universities admit and cater for the welfare of refugees. The evidence on a multi-stakeholder/ partnership, whole-of-society approach resonates with findings in literature such as Dryden-Peterson et al. (2018), Hakami (2016), Maringe et al. (2017), Nambi et al. (2023), Tamrat (2020), UNHCR (2018) and Woldegiorgis and Monari (2023). The aforementioned literature brings out instances where the roles of various stakeholders reinforce each other, as they aid refugee higher education access through bridging programmes; language and ICT support; scholarships, and letters of cooperation for waivers.

Situational factors and cross-cutting issues

Various factors were pointed out as intersecting with refugees' higher education access, largely with a negative and disenfranchising effect. Among the situational factors that came out through the findings were refugee demographics, which lead to basic education being prioritized by both government and donors, owing to the large

population of basic education age. Additionally, it was pointed out that refugee families are often made up of women and children, and are large and poor, thus putting a lot of pressure on the local resources. This along with the high cost of higher education leads to further concentrating interventions at basic education level, or focusing on women. In the meantime, the poverty, and the perceived minimal returns on higher education also makes it difficult for many refugees to access higher education. The refugee demographics, huge influxes, strained resources, poverty, preference for basic education, concentrating on humanitarian aid and their intersectional influence on refugees' higher education access also comes out through in a number of other studies (Avery & Said, 2017; Baker et al., 2019; Crawford & O'Callaghan, 2019; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018; Hall, 2015).

Other disenfranchising factors that were raised in the study findings included negligent parents who do not support education; unescorted minors who are left alone to fend for themselves, even when they grow and reach higher education level. In a way, this resonates with the findings of Kavuro (2010) and Maringe et al. (2017) who posit that refugee higher education students in RSA have to fend for themselves. Furthermore, it was revealed that even where students are offered scholarship support, they incur various costs before accessing the scholarships. Furthermore, during scholarship applications factors such as long distances to application and interview centres, difficulty filling in online applications come into play, while some qualifications need to be equated. These findings are similar to assertions made by the foregoing scholars that it is not easy to attain scholarship support. Cross-cutting issues such as gender, age, culture, location and disability were also cited as coming into play and influencing higher education access. Nonetheless, it was asserted that female students are affected more since in addition to refugees studying at an older age, the female have to attend to family obligations. Conversely, even with the scholarship support, it was noted that owing to the disadvantaging factors, females and

refugees with disabilities sometimes do not utilize the scholarship opportunities.

Multiple supportive pathways towards refugee higher education access

It was revealed that in addition to aiding access, the multiple pathways also contribute towards mitigating the various aforementioned marginalizing situational and cross-cutting factors. Among the supportive higher education pathways mentioned were bridging programmes, which in turn aid access to scholarships. It was revealed that scholarships are mainly offered within private universities, which have more flexible academic calendars that align with the various scholarship calls. The access is aided further by government calling for fees waivers, in tandem with national student rates. Another access pathway that was mentioned was where refugees can access higher education, without completing advanced secondary school level education, if they have a recognized diploma. These findings resonate with literature which talks of multiple supportive pathways to refugees' higher education access including bridging programmes, language and ICT lessons, scholarships, letters of cooperation and fees waivers (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018; Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2021; Tamrat, 2020; UNHCR, 2018). Literature also aligns with the findings which indicated that though there are supportive pathways through scholarships and district quotas, these do not meet the demand and thus go to only a few refugees (Avery & Said, 2017; Kavuro, 2010; Maringe et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Uganda, higher education access for South Sudanese refugees from Bidi Bidi settlement is intertwined with several challenges as well as supportive factors. The challenges, be they situational or cross-cutting issues are often intersectional and mutually reinforcing. Similarly supportive factors such as policy and legal frameworks, partnerships, and academic pathways also intersect at times and draw strength from each other. Thus, it can be concluded that

higher education access for the South Sudanese refugees from Bidi Bidi settlement can be strengthened if the intersecting challenges are unravelled further and they are duly addressed. In the same vein, the supportive mechanisms can be strengthened through getting a deeper understanding of how they influence access, in line with the existing refugee needs.

In light of the study findings, the paper makes recommendations towards unravelling the complex challenges that stand in the way of higher education access, as well as those that will help to strengthen the supportive mechanisms further. Outside Bidi Bidi settlement and Uganda, the recommendations could provide valuable insights towards strengthening refugees' higher education access. The recommendations are that the ERP Secretariat in Uganda should:

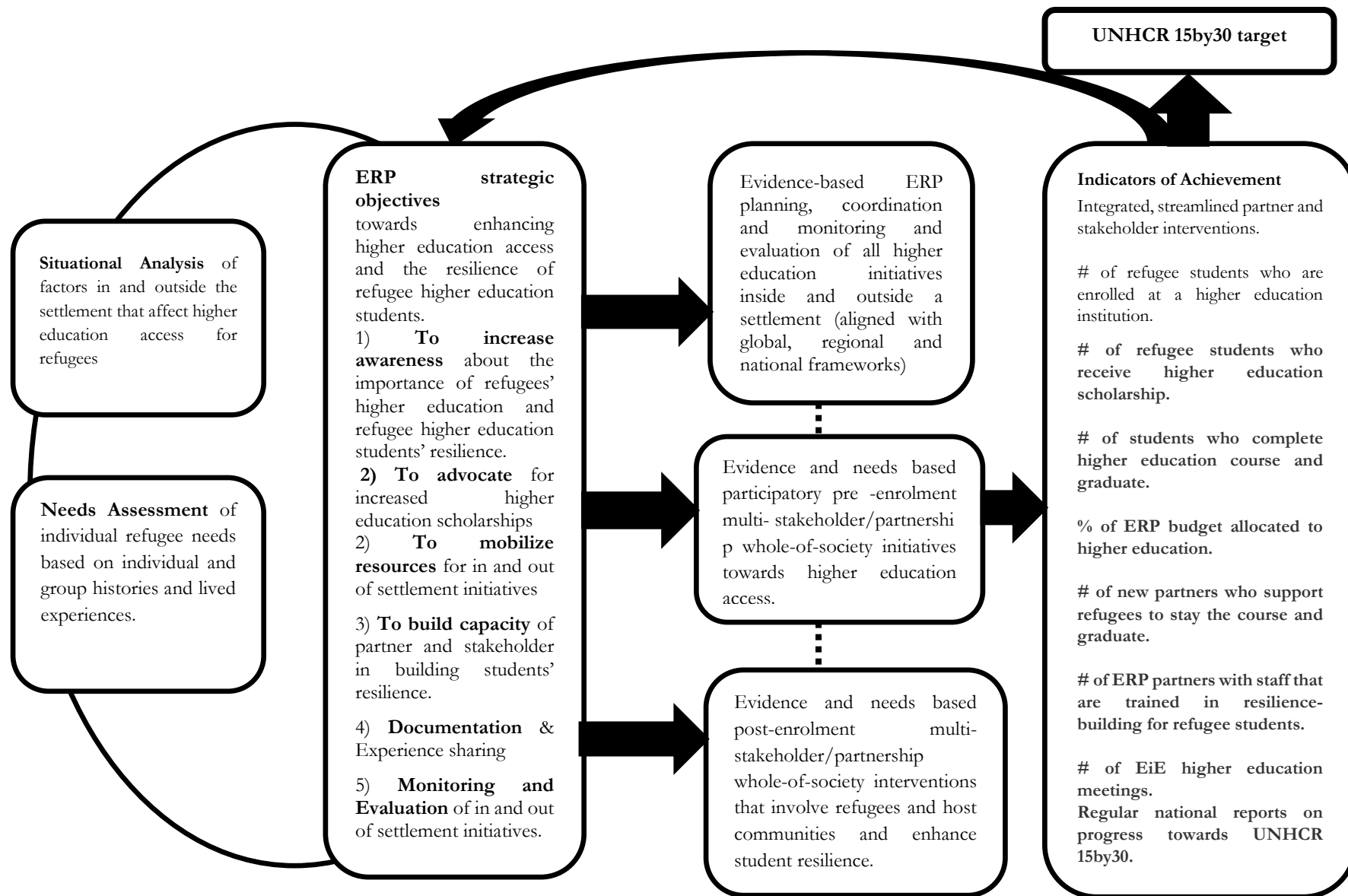
- Conduct a situational analysis on challenges and the supportive factors surrounding the refugee students' higher education access.
- Carry out a needs assessment to find out what the individual refugee students' needs are, in light of accessing higher education.
- Use information from the situational analysis and needs assessment to develop clear strategic objectives, activities outcomes and indicators of achievement, in the ERP, towards influencing refugee higher education students' access.

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

Based on the findings of the study and drawing upon relevant literature, the study has come up with the refugee access and resilience (RARE) model. The RARE model is premised on the principles of the UNHCR Education Strategy 2012-2016 that at national level, refugee education response frameworks should undertake situational analyses, in their particular dynamics. The 2012-2016 Strategy further notes that this will enable the development of country-level strategic objectives, expected results and indicators of achievement. The RARE model is also in line with the study findings on the need to understand refugee needs and this aligns with the

2012-2016 Strategy's call for host countries to determine the most appropriate refugee interventions based on refugees' actual and not just perceived needs. The model can be adopted by policy makers and stakeholders in Uganda, in order to improve higher education access for refugees. It is also a model that can be adapted towards supporting refugees outside Uganda.

Figure 1: The refugee access and resilience (RARE) model



Limitations

By employing the qualitative research approach, within one case of Bidi Bidi settlement, the findings may not be generalized to other refugee settlements. However, findings, especially those regarding the challenges and the supportive mechanisms, may have valuable lessons on augmenting higher education access for refugees.

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