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Preparing the ground to influence humanitarian sector policies, guidelines, and strategies in Uganda: Case Study Two

The Baobab Research Programme Consortium

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Case Study Two

Outcome Description: Number of policies, guidelines, and/or strategies for vulnerable groups in humanitarian settings influenced by the Baobab Research Programme Consortium's evidence.

Preparing the Ground to Influence Humanitarian Sector Policies, Guidelines, and Strategies in Uganda

April 2024





The Population Council leads the Baobab Research Program Consortium in close partnership with the Population Council Kenya and the African Population and Health Research Center. Situated in the East and Horn of Africa, this Africa-based and African-led consortium is filling critical evidence gaps to reduce inequities in sexual reproductive health and rights among vulnerable populations in humanitarian settings.

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Summary

In the East and Horn of Africa (EHA), over 5.5 million people face long term displacement, a majority being women and children/adolescents. Little is known about how to effectively deliver and/or expand access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services to the most vulnerable, and sparse evidence is currently available to support appropriate policies on SRHR in refugee settings. The [Baobab Research Programme Consortium](#) (RPC) seeks to address these challenges.

Baobab is aiming to produce a coherent body of high-quality policy and programme-relevant evidence to address some of the most critical SRHR concerns among vulnerable refugee populations in the EHA region. Baobab's formative research draws on well-regarded SRHR global measurement tools, introduced within refugee settings for the first time ever. The robust data emanating from this process will inform Baobab's operational research interventions in refugee settings and be used to **influence policies, guidelines and/or strategies for vulnerable groups in humanitarian settings**.

The RPC has successfully transitioned to implementation, a key component of which has been the forging of strategic partnerships to aid the generation of research, support the testing of interventions, and longer term, to support the use of evidence to inform policy and programming in refugee settings. Baobab's strategic partnerships are laying a foundation for the evidence generated to influence policies, guidelines and strategies. Early signs indicate that Baobab's research findings are being taken up by key partners working on the SRHR of children/adolescents and youth in refugee settings.

Impacts

- Establishment of institutional coordinating mechanisms, led by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD).
- Collaborative review of the National Child Policy Implementation Plan.
- Catalysing stronger collaborative efforts of key stakeholders working in humanitarian settings.

Pathways to Change

Enabler One: Strategic Partners and Collaboration for Influencing Policy

Baobab has invested significant time and human resources in building key partnerships with bodies that are responsible for developing programme- and national-level policies, guidelines and/or strategies, and for the implementation of strategic actions, around gender-based violence (GBV) and Child Protection in refugee settings. Many of the triggers to effecting change when building relationships with partners, are intangible and difficult

to pinpoint. The process requires patience, diplomacy, resilience and tactics that are not always conventional. In seeking buy-in and collaboration with government bodies, it is hard to know what might create a shift that strengthens the relationship or triggers an action or a change. It is also difficult to attribute any shifts along the pathway to change to any one activity, conversation, or piece of information. For example, was it a specific phone call between a Baobab researcher and a government official? A WhatsApp exchange? A research report co-authored by Baobab and government representatives? What is known is that the consistent presence of Baobab through these, and other activities, has allowed for strong and lasting partnerships to develop (further detail shared in a separate [Baobab Case Study 3: Cementing key partnerships to foster the use of evidence in humanitarian setting](#)). These were developed and nurtured prior to, and during, the data collection for the Humanitarian Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (HVACS) in refugee settings in Uganda and for other Baobab studies. The partnerships continue as collaborative research uptake takes shape, informing Baobab's operational research interventions in refugee settings and policies, guidelines and/or strategies for vulnerable groups in humanitarian settings.

At this stage, three key partnerships have been nurtured by the Population Council. These are with:

1. The UNHCR Regional Bureau for the East, Horn of Africa and Great Lakes (which provides technical oversight to countries in the region, including Baobab's focal countries of Uganda and Ethiopia);
2. The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Department of Refugees in Uganda; and,
3. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in Uganda.

Baobab's lead partner, the Population Council Inc., has had a technical cooperation agreement with UNHCR's Regional Bureau since 2014, with a focus on generating SRHR-related evidence and providing technical support to UNHCR implementing partners in the region to implement evidence-based SRHR interventions. The RPC has leveraged this agreement by fulfilling its requirements through Baobab's SRHR activities. Furthermore, OPM and UNHCR Uganda have participated in all Baobab studies to date, through providing technical assistance for sampling and intervention planning/implementation, and/or having representatives attend fieldwork training and provide supervisory support during data collection. These engagements help to foster ownership of the studies and data early on, and naturally lead to reflection on next steps following the studies. For example, during data collection training for the first-ever HVACS in a refugee context, OPM mentioned wanting to be kept apprised of the results and wanting to convene a partners' meeting to share the learnings.

To create space for deliberation on the HVACS findings and link Baobab's pioneering research to action and policies for children/adolescents and youth survivors in refugee settings, the RPC held an initial, virtual dissemination meeting with the OPM's Department

of Refugees and UNHCR to learn about and consider the study results. Given the importance and urgency of the findings, OPM renewed its commitment to bringing together humanitarian stakeholders from across various sectors to have the same opportunity to learn about, and deliberate upon, the HVACS results. In June 2023, the Baobab RPC and the OPM's Department of Refugees co-convened a Data-to-Action (D2A) workshop in Kampala, with support from the MGLSD, UNHCR Uganda, the UNHCR Regional Bureau, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) headquarters. State officials from the Government of Uganda, civil society organisations (CSOs) and international partners participated in the workshop.

The D2A workshop, established new collaborations beyond the Baobab RPC by bringing stakeholders together with the common goal of discussing the research. A senior official from the MGLSD, shared:

“Our work has been limited in humanitarian settings because of overlapping mandates between the OPM and MGLSD and this coming together is giving us an opportunity to collaborate better to address GBV against children and youth.”

Katie Ogwang from UNHCR Regional Bureau further commented that the RPC's collaboration with government stakeholders is:

“...an entry point to include refugees into national policies. The involvement and engagement of the OPM and the MGLSD throughout the research is a clear demonstration of the government's commitment to the inclusion of refugees and forcibly displaced populations in national policies and strategies for the protection of women and children.”

Another key trigger for eventual policy influence is being strategic about who delivers messages to partners. Baobab identified the MGLSD Focal Person for Ending VAC as a critical voice needed at the D2A workshop. Baobab not only invited them to the workshop but tasked them with giving a presentation on relevant policies. This invitation, and their presentation, led to robust participation in the workshop by MGLSD officials.

Importantly, the D2A workshop led to stakeholders' identification of immediate strategies that could easily be implemented in response to the HVACS findings. Baobab has drawn upon these recommended strategies to inform the development of an intervention. Furthermore, following the D2A workshop, Baobab forged a brand-new partnership with the MGLSD, and has continued to nurture and maintain existing partnerships with the OPM, UNHCR, and several UNHCR implementing partners. Baobab also participates in humanitarian sector Technical Working Groups in Uganda, which provide an additional platform for research uptake, strengthening partnerships, and creating a space for Baobab to contribute towards advancing SRHR.

Enabler Two: New Insights for Policy Influence

With regard to policy, the HVACS findings provide decision-makers in Uganda's humanitarian settings with a baseline that covers all refugee settlements in the country. The study utilised the population-based, systematic, well-established method of the Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) to measure the prevalence, nature and consequences of sexual, physical and emotional violence against children and youth in refugee settings in Uganda and contribute to existing surveillance systems in this context. The multi-sectoral D2A workshop provided a space to further build the trust and relationships with key partners, to put them in the driving seat regarding policies and programming.

The data gave key partners and stakeholders new considerations around GBV against children/adolescents and youth in refugee settings as a senior official from the MGLSD acknowledged:

"It is very insightful data. The D2A workshop promoted discussions amongst us stakeholders about what the data was telling us so that we could respond. We have seen, over the years, a lot of investments by refugee agencies to address GBV against children and youth, with mental health support and response, child protection officers, case management processes and community engagement. We had assumed the situation in refugee settings would be better because they have better funded programmes. But the research showed otherwise. It gave us an opportunity to reflect on our previous investments and opened our eyes to the need to be more responsive to the data, especially with reductions in funding for humanitarian settings. We were able to ask ourselves – what does this mean for the government, other actors and local communities?"

Peter Kisaaye, a Baobab research fellow, reflects on what he heard at the workshop:

"Stakeholders who work with refugees were concerned that the data showed that refugee settlements were not necessarily safe. Refugees were fleeing insecure situations to relative safety in refugee settlements, but for some, the refugee settlement was the place where they experienced their first incident of violence. The implementing partners highlighted that they needed to find ways to address this."

The discussions between policy makers and implementers at the D2A workshop helped them to critique their strategies for providing support services to children/adolescents and youth who experience violence in refugee settings.

"The stakeholders also wanted to prioritise developing more creative strategies to reach young people where they are, if they need support services. This was in response to the findings showing that whilst there was high knowledge of where to seek help, most children/adolescents and youth who experienced violence did not disclose their experiences or seek help." Peter Kisaaye, Baobab.

Enabler Three: New Actions to Influence Policies, Guidelines and Strategies

The D2A workshop was the culmination of months of strategic relationship-building by the Baobab RPC, before, during and after the HVACS data collection. It created a forum where, in the presence of key humanitarian stakeholders/implementers, the Government of Uganda, led by the OPM and MGLSD, committed to using the priorities identified during the workshop to inform key follow up activities.

There were two major changes initiated at the D2A workshop regarding policies, guidelines, and/or strategies for vulnerable groups in humanitarian settings, influenced by RPC evidence. These were:

1. Plan to **use the priorities identified during the D2A workshop to inform key follow up activities**, through the **establishment of an institutional coordinating mechanism** (comprising government and supporting agencies outside of the government such as bilateral, multilateral, and cooperating agencies).
2. The commitment to **integrate recommendations from the Uganda HVACS into the National Child Policy Implementation Plan**, by the OPM (Department of Refugees) and the MGLSD.

The MGLSD was identified as the lead government agency for coordinating activities, with support from the OPM. Stakeholders at the D2A workshop identified immediate activities to be undertaken in response to the HVACS findings. This commitment from the MGLSD, to coordinate activities, is expected for the next two years, through to the end of 2025.

The collaborative development and implementation of the D2A workshop ensured that a clear picture was presented to all the stakeholders present regarding government initiatives around GBV against children/adolescents and youth. A key trigger for creating change around how to use evidence came when the Ending VAC Focal Person within the MGLSD took the audience through highlights from the [Uganda National Child Policy](#) and the [National Child Policy Implementation Plan](#). This showed that national action around GBV against children/adolescents and youth was already underway in Uganda, and that the evidence shared at the D2A workshop would enrich existing plans by filling gaps in evidence to inform actions centred on refugee populations.

“The review of the [National Child Policy Implementation Plan](#) will take place in 2025. The implementation plan provides us with a broad structure, and we are trying to break it down so that the findings of the [HVACS] research are included, to influence the implementation plan. We have Child Well-being Committees at district and county levels and we have established them in the refugee-hosting communities, to bring together different stakeholders to talk about child well-being. Now that we have done a VACS in refugee settings, we will be able to incorporate more recommendations and address gaps during the implementation of the national child policy.” Lydia Wasula, MGLSD.

In November 2023, the Baobab team was invited to review and incorporate insights into the draft UNHCR National Child Protection Strategy (2023-2025) for the Uganda Operation prior to its finalisation. This Strategy is aligned with the UNHCR Uganda's Multi-Year, Multi-Partner Strategy (2023-2025) and consolidates all previous guidance and planning documents related to their child protection strategic directions. The Strategy was drafted based on a thorough situation analysis to which Baobab and other partners contributed, presenting a significant opportunity for key partners to collectively design strategic directions.

Enabler Four: Evidence critical when budgets are shrinking

Baobab's researchers, Consortium Advisory Group (CAG) members and partners recognise that budgets and funding in the research world and in the humanitarian space are reducing, despite the vulnerability of children/adolescents and youth remaining high. Baobab's holistic approach, that encourages the utilisation of evidence to influence programming, investments, policies and guidelines within existing national policies and plans, becomes even more relevant within this framework of dwindling resources. The RPC has provided evidence and platforms for stakeholders to interpret the data and reflect upon their programming and strategies, to develop plans that have a better chance of improving the situation for children/adolescents and youth in humanitarian settings. As one CAG member reflected during a meeting held in December 2023:

“For years and years, humanitarian actors have invested in the same programming, but now because of Baobab they have a tool, and they have an evidence base that guides their refined programming and helps them prioritise within that limited funding.” Joanina Karugaba, Baobab CAG Member and Senior Inter-Agency Coordination Officer at the UNHCR Regional Bureau

The D2A workshop triggered a realisation that there is a need to review and align strategies for service delivery in refugee settings.

“The [HVACS] findings confirm many of the things we see in the settlements. But in terms of response, every [implementing] partner has been coming in with their own strategy and [standard operating procedures] on how to address this matter. Through this workshop, we have now realised that we have actually been implementing some of the INSPIRE principles without even knowing it... but now what we need is aligning better to these national and internationally recognised frameworks for service delivery for both refugees and host communities. It has been a good eye opener for me and most of my colleagues” Abdul Ramadhan, Commandant, Adjumani Refugee Settlement, OPM.

The shrinking investments in humanitarian settings, and a greater call for localisation in development work, means that Baobab's approach of partnering with government ministries, involving refugees and host communities as research team members and

intervention implementers is more relevant than ever, as Jane Asiiimwe from UNHCR Uganda comments:

“That this study was conducted in refugee settings is very important because right now we [UNHCR] are supporting the integration of refugees into national systems. Increasingly, we see shrinking funding for humanitarian work compared to development-leaning interventions, yet child vulnerability remains high. So, this data is timely. It directly informs our child protection and integration of refugees into national systems, to ensure that refugees are covered within the budgets and plans of government.”

Lessons Learnt

- Being rooted in the region, with respectful, patient and nuanced tactics for developing relationships is key to building a strong foundation to influence policies, guidelines and strategies. This takes time, resources and effort and, in the short term, can be intangible.
- New evidence, shared with the right decision makers, at the right time, by the right people, can affect structural shifts for more effective policy making. The RPC’s contribution to the establishment of an institutional coordinating mechanism, led by the MGLSD with support from OPM demonstrates this.
- Shrinking budgets for research and humanitarian settings mean the evidence generated by the RPC becomes ever more critical for effective decision making for policies and strategies.