

# THE SELF RELIANCE STRATEGY AND REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS: EVIDENCE FROM ORUCHINGA REFUGEE SETTLEMENT, SOUTH WESTERN UGANDA.

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## ABSTRACT

*The self-reliance strategy in Uganda has very good aims of empowering refugees become self reliant and reduce on their dependence on humanitarian agencies among other reasons. By focusing on Oruchinga refugee settlement, the study found out that, refugees have been able to engage in a number of livelihood strategies both agricultural and non-agricultural in a bid to stand on their own feet. A number of enabling factors ranging from availability of land, labour to favorable weather conditions and local markets have to a small extent favored them to become self reliant. However, to a big extent refugees are affected by a number of challenges that have made it hard for them to be self-reliant, a reason why they are still dependent on humanitarian agencies for livelihoods support.*

**Key Words:** *Self Reliance, Strategy, Refugees, Livelihoods, Oruchinga, Refugee Settlement, Uganda*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

UNHCR defines self-reliance as the ability of an individual, household or community to depend (rely) on their own resources (physical, social and natural capital or assets), judgment and capabilities with minimal external assistance in meeting basic needs...It is understood to mean that refugees are able to provide for themselves, their household and community members in terms of food and other needs, including shelter, water, sanitation, health and education, and that they can cope with unexpected events, and are no longer dependent on outside assistance under normal circumstances (2004e:64).

The Self Reliance Strategy (SRS) came as a result of the need to respond to the protracted nature of refugee situations in the late 1990s especially the Sudanese refugees in West Nile and Northern parts of Uganda. Later on other refugee nationalities notably, Somalis, Burundians, Rwandans and Congolese became protracted refugee situations creating a need to extend the SRS to all refugee settlements in Uganda hosting refugees.

Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Lucy Hovil (2004) note that “the SRS was jointly designed by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR Uganda in May 1999, the culmination of a process that officially began in 1998”. According to the SRS, refugees need to grow their food, reduce dependence on humanitarian assistance and are into benefits instead of being burdens to the host countries. The philosophy behind the SRS is that refugees have assets, skills and capabilities that can be tapped to support themselves and later on transfer these to their countries of origin when they return home. The SRS still guides Uganda as a host country to many refugees from neighboring countries. It is in this context that the paper discusses the SRS and refugee livelihoods.

DFID (2001) argues that “a livelihood comprises the capabilities and assets (both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is said to be sustainable when it can recover from shocks, stresses and trends and maintain and enhance its capabilities both now and in the future while not undermining the natural resource base for future

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generations". The above definition is similar to Chambers and Conway, 1992.

According to Machtelt De Vriese (2006) "a livelihood framework is a way of understanding how households derive their livelihoods. An easy way of thinking within a livelihood framework is using the household triangle of assets, capabilities and activities. Household members use their capabilities and their assets to carry out activities through which they gain their livelihood. Household assets refer to the resources that households own or have access to for gaining a livelihood. Where capabilities are the combined knowledge, skills, state of health and ability to labour or command labour of a household. Household strategies are the ways in which households deploy assets and use their capabilities in order to meet households' objectives and are often based on past experience (Ibid)

Most of the literature on Self Reliance Strategy (SRS) captures the views from the top (UNHCR and GoU) that presents the SRS as a successful strategy. This is a one-sided view and it's important to get a balanced view by getting views of the refugees on the ground about their assessment of the SRS and livelihoods.

The general objective of the study was to establish refugee livelihoods in the context of the self-reliance strategy from the perspective of the refugees. Specifically, the study sought to find out the refugee livelihood strategies, conditions favoring refugees' livelihoods strategies and challenges facing refugees' livelihoods strategies.

An understanding of the views of refugees concerning their livelihoods under the SRS would facilitate refugee policy making and implementation in Uganda based on the lived experiences of refugees. This is important for the protection and promotion of refugee rights and welfare.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach with a case study research design and was carried out in Oruchinga refugee settlement which was established in 1961 for the Rwandan Tutsi refugees. Oruchinga settlement is found in South Western Uganda in Isingiro District near the border with Tanzania. The study population included refugees, settlement officials representing Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), local hosts and humanitarian officials representing humanitarian organizations, UNHCR and the

implementing agencies. Simple random sampling was used to select refugees and host communities while purposive sampling was used to select humanitarian and OPM officials. Data was collected using Focus Group Discussions (with a Focus Group Discussion Guide as a tool), interviews where an interview guide and key informant schedule were used as tools of data collection. Observation was also used guided by an observation check list. The researcher was able to observe the economic activities carried out by refugees as their livelihood strategies. Thematic and content analysis were used for data analysis. The study observed ethical issues including getting permission from the OPM and Settlement Commandant, assuring the respondents of confidentiality, anonymity and seeking their consent.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 Introduction

### 3.2 Refugee Livelihood Strategies

The study was interested in finding out what livelihood strategies the refugees were involved in. It was found out that the majority of refugees were involved in agriculture that involved crop growing, livestock activities, aquaculture and non-agricultural activities. Since most of the refugees are rural based, it was expected that the majority depend on agriculture as a livelihood strategy. This is in agreement with (Kibreab, 1989; UNHCR, 2000, Jacobsen, 2001) who argued that placement in rural settlements is based on the assumption that majority of refugees are of a rural background and can support themselves through agriculture until their repatriation.

### 3.2.1 Agriculture

#### 3.2.1.1 Crop growing

#### Maize growing

Respondents indicated that they engage in maize growing. Maize growing was all evident in most parts of the settlement. Maize was used to supplement the daily nutrition needs while the rest was sold for earning an income. The respondents said that maize can be cooked, roasted and made into maize floor. However, a good number of respondents observed that they harvest less because of theft of maize cobs at night. One focus group participant said;

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We have a challenge of theft of our maize cobs at night. We have reported to the Camp Commandant and he has promised to take action. It's very demoralizing to engage in maize growing when you know that thieves are coming to 'harvest' it (Focus Group Discussion, November 2008).

**Cassava**

Respondents also observed that cassava is grown and on average households had between 4 to 50 plants on small pieces of land. Cassava was a source of food as it supplemented bananas and posho. Cassava was eaten fresh or dry mixed with millet.

**Bananas**

The research findings revealed that respondents who engaged in agriculture grew bananas popularly known as "matooke". Some of the respondents observed that they grew bananas on a large scale just like it is done in the host communities. Bananas are a staple food of South Western Uganda where Oruchinga Settlement is located. Perhaps the refugees have learnt banana growing from the host population. Bananas were grown mainly for home consumption although a good number of respondents observed that bananas are also grown for sale.

**Sweet potatoes**

Respondents also noted that they were involved in sweet potato growing as a livelihood strategy. In the trading centres, sweet potatoes were grown on a small scale in form of small mounds near the hedges of homes. However outside the trading centres, there were relatively big sweet potato gardens measuring between 10 metres to 30 metres. Sweet potatoes grown on a small scale were mainly for home consumption. Those farmers who had reasonably big gardens were able to sell in the small settlement markets. Sweet potato vines were also on demand from the farmers who wanted to grow their own potatoes. Vines were also used as animal feeds for pigs and cows.

**Growing beans**

The study established that there were a number of beans gardens in the settlement. Beans were at times mixed with maize and cassava because of shortage of land making it hard to grow each crop separately. Just like maize, beans were grown to supplement on their food menu. However, others grew beans for sale in the

evening markets so that they could supplement on their meager earnings.

**Ground nuts**

Ground nuts were grown in the settlement but on a small scale. Respondents observed that ground nuts do not grow well on the soils in the settlement, take long to mature and the harvests are little. People opted to grow other crops like beans and vegetables because they are favored by the conditions in the settlement.

**Peas**

It was established that peas were also grown though on a small scale. However, there were few gardens of peas in the settlement. The respondents that the researcher talked to said that the weather in the area was not favorable for peas growing. They also noted that peas are eaten by birds and since there were many birds in the area, it was not wise and economical to grow peas.

**Fruits**

The findings indicate that refugees were also engaged in fruit growing like pineapples, oranges, avocados, mangos and passion fruits. All these were grown on a small scale in compounds and back yards. Fruits were grown both for home consumption and sale in the markets.

**Vegetables**

The study found that refugees were engaged in vegetables growing. Vegetables included cabbages, dodo, tomatoes, egg plants (ntura) and spinach. Most of the respondents said they produced vegetables mainly for sale. It was found out that the cost of a kilogram of vegetables like tomatoes ranged between 1 US Dollar to 1.5 US Dollars.

**3.2.1.2 Livestock activities****Cattle rearing**

Some refugees who had access to land carried out animal grazing as a livelihood strategy. The cows were few in number because of the inadequate land in the settlement. The respondents observed that they reared traditional indigenous long horned cattle. When asked why they reared local breeds, it was revealed that the cross and exotic breeds were expensive to look after, needed

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intensive care and were heavy feeders. One respondent observed that,

Cross breeds need to be sprayed almost twice or thrice in a week, where do you get money for buying the drugs? I would rather graze the local ones and I take two months without spraying (Interview, November 2008)

### Piggery

The research findings indicated that some respondents reared pigs. Pig rearing was common in all parts of the settlement. However, in some areas, pigs were not encouraged because of religious beliefs especially the Muslims. Pigs were being fed on the left overs and food remains from the people's homes, restaurants and garbage heaps. The families on average owned one or two adult pigs and were selling piglets to earn money.

It was found out that the common type of pigs were the exotic white breeds. A good number of respondents observed that pig rearing was unhygienic with bad odours and this was a source of tension between those rearing pigs and their neighbors. Respondents confirmed that refugees rearing pigs were able to get money from the sale of pigs because pork was being sold in several drinking joints in the trading centres located in the settlement.

### Goat rearing

Another livelihood strategy by the refugees was goat rearing. Goats are sold to those operating abattoirs and others that sell roasted meat in the trading centres and drinking joints. The study found out that there were no milking goats as people in the area looked at goat's milk as inferior to cow milk. Most of the respondents who rear goats said they rear them mainly for commercial purposes and have been able to get incomes to look after their families.

### Sheep rearing

It was found out that sheep rearing was on a small scale. Those who kept some sheep had on average between two to five. The respondents observed that the sheep were sold at high process just like goats. The sheep were reared for commercial purposes and as sources of fat from their tails. From time to time, the lower part of the tail was cut and the fat preserved which was used when preparing sauce.

### Rabbit rearing

Respondents noted that this was an activity for young refugee children. Mostly exotic white breeds were being reared and these were kept in small houses to protect them from dogs. Rabbits were mostly fed on weeds collected by the young boys. Refugee children observed that rabbits were a source of food and income. It was pointed out that one rabbit was sold between 2 to 8 US Dollars. Refugee children rearing rabbits were able to supplement their family incomes and also buy scholastic materials to use at school.

### Aquaculture

A limited number of refugees reared fish in the neighboring ponds, swamps, rivers and other water bodies. The fish was a source of food and also incomes. This however was done on a small scale.

### 3.2.2 Non-Agricultural livelihood strategies

#### Mechanical/technical works

The research findings indicate that refugees were involved in mechanical and technical works. These included building and house construction, bicycle repair, carpentry among others. The researcher observed refugees who were offering these services in the trading centres in the settlement. They revealed that they had not attended vocational and technical institutions but they were able to gain experience through working with professional mechanics, builders and carpenters.

#### Small scale businesses

The study also found out that a good number of refugees were involved in small scale businesses. These included shop keeping (grocery), saloon management, coffee trading, butchery, cinema halls and furniture workshops. Some of the shops were selling beverages such as fruit juice, sodas and porridge, house hold items like soap, salt, paraffin, sugar and many others.

#### Casual labour

The respondents revealed that they were working as casual labourers in the local population's farm lands, shambas, and gardens and paid on a daily basis. Refugees also get food like bananas, maize, cassava and beans in exchange for casual labour. A good number of refugees have been able to earn a living from offering their labour to the local hosts.

#### Craft Works

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The respondents revealed that they carry out craft works as a livelihood strategy. The craft works included carpets, baskets, mats, chairs among others. Refugees were getting raw materials from the local hosts and neighboring swamps and River Kagera. The craft products were sold in the local markets and to the local hosts. The majority of the women were involved in this livelihood activity.

### 3.3 Factors Favoring Refugee Livelihoods Strategies

The study was interested in finding out the factors that have favoured refugee livelihood strategies and making them become self-reliant. A number of factors were found to be favoring the above refugee livelihood strategies.

#### Fertile Soils

Respondents pointed out fertile soils as a major factor favoring agricultural activities mainly crop growing. One of the respondents observed that,

Without fertile soils here in Oruchinga, we wouldn't have been able to grow crops. We would be entirely dependent on UNHCR and her implementing agencies for food. But because this place is fertile we are able to grow our own food and sell some (Focus Group Discussion, November 2008)

Also the fertile soils have favored the growth of pastures and fodders for animal feeds. However, although the soils are fertile, people have less access to land and this has posed a challenge to agricultural activities in the settlement. This is because the refugees are many and the land is not enough for all them. The Oruchinga used to host Rwandan refugees but these days its home to Burundian and Congolese refugees.

#### Extension services

Study responses revealed that livelihoods in the settlement are favored by provision of extension services to the refugees. Such services include, demonstration seminars, provision of inputs like seedlings as well as awareness about the scientific methods of agriculture. This has highly supported refugees engaged in agriculture. It was revealed that UNHCR provides seedlings while German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and NSAMIZI Institute provide for education and vocational training to the refugees. This was confirmed in one of the Focus Group Discussions,

UNHCR, GTZ and NSAMIZI have trained us in vocational education. Some of our children have been trained in carpentry, joinery, mechanics, hotel management and mechanics. A number of them have started their workshops, hotels and saloons and are able to get some income (Focus Group Discussion, November 2008)

#### Weather

The refugees' activities are favored by good weather conditions. This area has two rainy seasons, September to December and February to April. The dry months are January, June and July are these are always the harvesting months. However, due to climate change some of these seasons were beginning to change which has disrupted refugees' activities.

#### Availability of free land

The study established that the availability of government land in the settlement has favored refugees' livelihood activities mainly farming activities. The Office of the Camp Commandant (Office of the Prime Minister) is the one responsible for allocation of farming and settlement land to the refugees. One of the refugees remarked that,

We are lucky to have free land here in Uganda. In countries like Kenya and Tanzania, refugees are put in camps without access to land and a chance to engage in agricultural activities. We are grateful to the Ugandan government for this opportunity to have land (Interview, December 2008)

#### Availability of markets

Respondents confirmed that the availability of markets has favored the refugees' livelihood strategies. It was revealed that refugee farmers sell their produce in the evening markets in the nearby trading centres. Also, there is a big weekly market in a town called Kajaho near Oruchinga Settlement. This market attracts many traders from the neighboring districts of Isingiro like Mbarara, Kiruhura, Rakai, Bushenyi, Ntungamo who come to buy goods. This has enabled refugees to sell their products to the traders coming from the neighboring areas.

#### Availability of transport and communication

The respondents revealed that transport and communication have favored the growth of livelihood strategies within the settlement. The availability of Mbarara-Kikagata road up to the Tanzanian border has



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avored the movement of traders both from within Uganda and Tanzania. The refugees are also able to transport their produce from the settlement to Isingiro, Kikagate, Kaberebere and Mbarara towns. One refugee respondent observed that,

It's easy for us to transport our products to the neighboring towns because of the Kikagate road. Ugandan traders use the same road to come here in the settlement (Interview, December 2008)

The availability of mobile telecommunication facilities (mobile phones and sim cards) has also favored refugees' activities. Refugees are free to access these facilities and they are not discriminated against. Refugees are able to communicate with their customers and trading partners with much ease.

### Availability of labour

Most refugees agreed that the availability of cheap labor has favored refugees' livelihoods activities. Respondents pointed out that they use family labor (children after school and on weekends) and the fellow refugees who want casual jobs to earn some wages.

### Credit facilities

Respondents were of the view that they were able to get credit facilities from their fellow refugees and host communities. There are people whose business is to lend money to others locally known as "kafuna". Refugees who have property like cars, motor cycles, generators, cows were able to borrow money from these money lenders. This has enabled them to boost their economic activities like trade, hotels, saloons and agricultural projects.

### 3.4 Challenges of Refugee Livelihoods Strategies

The study was interested in finding out the challenges hindering the refugee livelihood strategies. A number of challenges were identified by the refugees and they are presented below.

#### Limited access to land

As already pointed out the majority of respondents derive their livelihoods from agriculture. Agriculture depends entirely on land. Therefore when land is limited then agricultural activities are also limited. That is the true story of refugees in Oruchinga settlement. Refugees have limited land where they can carry out agricultural activities. This is understandable because Uganda does

not have enough land for the ever increasing number of refugees from the turbulent region. As if that is not enough, refugees are denied from growing perennial crops like coffee, tobacco and bananas. This limits refugees' agricultural activities and interests especially for those who may want to grow these perennial crops for commercial purposes.

### Traditional methods of production

Refugees use rudimentary tools in production for example hoes, pangas, slashers among others. This discourages large scale production and quantity of output. The refugees find themselves without any option but to produce little for home consumption.

### Land encroachment by the local hosts

The refugees face encroachment on 'their land' by the local hosts who see refugees as intruders and foreigners on the Ugandan land. This attitude by the local hosts has worsened land conflicts between the refugees and host population. In a sister neighboring refugee settlement of Nakivale, the situation has gone out hand. With these land wrangles, refugees' livelihoods are at risk as one humanitarian official pointed out in an interview,

Refugee' livelihoods are limited by the land conflicts between refugees and local hosts. There are cases when refugees' gardens are destroyed by the local hosts. Refugees' livestock like cows and goats have constantly been targeted, injured and killed (Interview, December 2008)

### Soil exhaustion

Refugees also observed that soils in the settlement have been exhausted because of constant growing of crops one season after the other without any rest. The soils are also exposed to soil erosion because of the relief of some areas in the settlement. This has resulted in the loss of soil fertility which leading to the reduction in output and harvests by the refugees.

### Lack of enough capital

The majority of the respondents pointed out that lack of enough capital was a big challenge to their livelihood strategies. Most of the refugees are not financially stable and it becomes hard to adopt new scientific methods of agriculture or expand their businesses. They noted that those engaged in agriculture find it hard to use fertilizers as well spraying against pests that are a threat to their crops and animals especially cows.

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### Crop destruction by animals

Farmers complained of their crops being destroyed by animals especially cows and goats from their neighbors. There was an observation that conflicts between crop cultivators and cattle keepers were on the increase with the former accusing the latter of leaving their animals to stray on their gardens.

### Pests and diseases

This was another challenge hindering refugees' livelihood strategies especially those engaged in agriculture. This was a big problem that was affecting harvests, quality and quantity of the agricultural produce.

### Inadequate markets

Refugees pointed out this as another problem impacting on their livelihoods. Refugees' products were of poor quality and this has reduced on their marketability and demand. Besides, the refugees did not have access to distant markets like Mbarara and Kampala where they would be able to sell at high prices and get good money.

### Weather changes

Because of climate change, weather changes have become a reality in Oruchinga settlement just like in other parts of the country and the world. It was revealed that during the dry seasons, the area dries up to the extent of failing to get water for their animals. Dry seasons wipe out their crops leaving them exposed to famine and poverty. The respondents gave the example of the 1999 drought which hit the area and led to the loss of cows and crops. As a result the area was affected by famine that seriously affected refugees.

### Inadequate credit facilities

The refugees also indicated that there was a problem of inadequate credit facilities. They lacked micro finance institutions to borrow money to invest in their projects. The available money lenders were expensive and charged high interests which they could not afford. It was common to hear of people who had lost their private property to these money lenders because of failure to pay the loans.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the self-reliance strategy has very good aims of empowering refugees become self reliant and reduce on their dependence on humanitarian

agencies. Through this strategy, refugees have been able to engage in a number of livelihood strategies both agricultural and non-agricultural in a bid to stand on their own feet. A number of enabling factors ranging from availability of land, labour to favorable weather conditions and local markets have to a small extent favored them to become self reliant. However, to a big extent refugees are affected by a number of challenges that have made it hard for them to be self-reliant, a reason why they are still dependent on humanitarian agencies for livelihoods support.

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