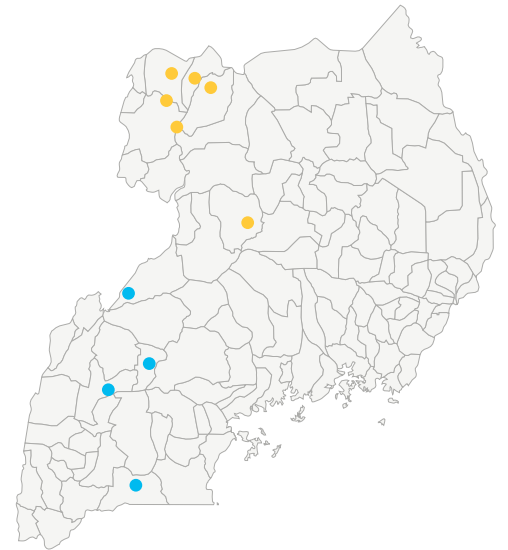


February 2021

# Community leader insights and recommendations during the Covid-19 response



● Congolese settlement ● South Sudanese settlement

As the global pandemic emerged in early 2020, it presented unprecedented challenges both to refugee communities across Uganda and the humanitarian response implemented on their behalf. Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) has consulted communities regularly over the past year and maintained remote dialogue with refugee leaders across the ten most populous settlements in the country.

The first (March 2020) and second (June 2020) rounds of consultation asked what sort of information was getting through to refugees and what behaviours to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 leaders were observing in their communities. Conversations also covered trust in such measures and how people were coping with the economic impacts of the pandemic. A third round of consultations in September 2020 aimed to sense-check and discuss our findings with the same leaders by asking for their perspective on what had worked well in the response to Covid-19 and by eliciting their recommendations on how to optimise the response. In the fourth round of dialogue in November 2020, the team communicated a synthesis of findings back to community leaders and collected additional feedback on next steps.

This report summarises the key insights and recommendations from community leaders from the most recent rounds of dialogue. References to earlier findings are linked throughout the report.

## Communities have sufficient information on the virus but find spread prevention measures difficult

Do people in your community feel they have the information needed to protect themselves from Covid-19?<sup>1</sup>



In the first half of 2020, community leaders were confident that they had sufficient access to information on Covid-19 and felt that the sources of such information were trustworthy. This was in line with the U-Learn Risk Communication and Community Engagement Assessment, which found 99% of refugees and Ugandans<sup>2</sup> surveyed had received information on Covid-19 between January – June 2020. Most had received information on Covid-19 symptoms; explanations of the disease, transmission, and protection; social distancing guidance; and information on risks and complications associated with the disease.<sup>3</sup>

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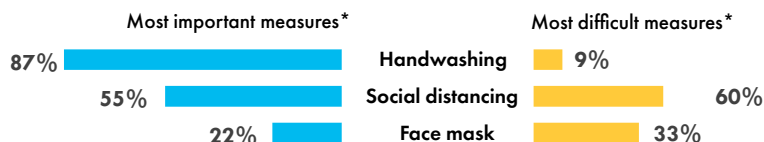


<sup>1</sup> Ground Truth Solutions. September 2020. "Key Informant interviews with refugee community leaders in Uganda." [https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID\\_19\\_bulletin\\_uganda-R2.pdf](https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID_19_bulletin_uganda-R2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> This includes Ugandan communities living in the hosting districts and Ugandans living in Tororo, Kampala, Amuru and Pakwach.

<sup>3</sup> U-Learn, Risk Communication and Community Engagement Assessment, 2021.

While people seemed to be aware of preventative measures in the first half of the year, community leaders consistently mentioned difficulties with social distancing, wearing facemasks, and handwashing.<sup>4</sup>



\* Percentages do not total 100 because respondents could choose multiple options.

We decided to explore this further in the ensuing rounds and ask leaders for suggestions on how adherence to preventative measures could be enhanced. Leaders noted that refugees in their communities were increasingly complacent around Covid-19 preventative measures and often lacked access to the necessary protective equipment. They referred to the poor quality and lack of access to masks, the deteriorating quality of handwashing facilities, and a shortage of accessible handwashing facilities.

Community leaders noted that masks are costly to purchase, not everyone in their area had received face masks, and that one mask per person was insufficient. They suggested providing refugees with face masks free of charge. Similarly, leaders called for the distribution of more handwashing facilities, soap, and jerrycans.

In Kyaka II refugee settlement in western Uganda one male leader noted in September that “continuous sensitisation and awareness-creation needs to be carried out because most people think the precautionary measures put in place were a political move by the government as elections are approaching.” Downplaying the virus featured frequently in the inter-agency rumour tracker, which found that of the 57% of reported rumours downplaying the risks of the virus, 22% were attributed to the belief that the government was playing up the severity of Covid-19 for politics, with many citing the run-up to the 2021 presidential elections.<sup>6</sup> This highlights the need to continuously sensitise communities to the risks of the virus.

### Recommendations for increasing adherence to Covid-19 measures

- Distribute more and better quality facemasks
- Provide more handwashing facilities, soap, and jerrycans
- Initiate continuous community sensitisation campaigns

### Gender based violence on the rise due to severe economic strains

The precarious economic situation many refugees found themselves in led to a deterioration of social relations, as cuts in humanitarian assistance coincided with the global health pandemic, according to community leaders spoken to during the first half of 2020.

Community leaders have observed an increase in cases of gender-based violence (GBV) as one result of this more precarious economic situation. Several leaders mentioned an increase in alcoholism during the pandemic, and that some men have misused cash assistance or sold food assistance to buy alcohol. This is a source of tension and has led to abuse in some cases. A female leader in Kyangwali refugee settlement in western Uganda explained that in her community, “GBV is a result of a misuse of money and food in homes, when men end up wasting money in alcohol-drinking or taking food received to other wives, not those originally on the card” (September 2020).

Seeing a lack of resources as the root cause, leaders suggested that aid agencies and the Ugandan government invest in programmes which support refugees’ access to livelihood opportunities. This in turn would help reduce GBV cases in their settlements.

<sup>4</sup> Ground Truth Solutions. September 2020. “Key Informant interviews with refugee community leaders

<sup>5</sup> U-Learn, Rumour Tracking Bulletin 4, February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

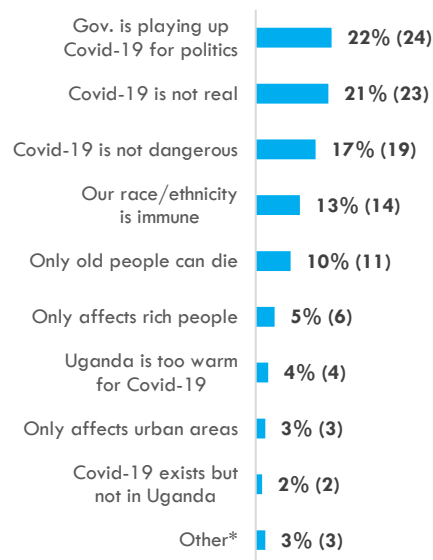
<sup>7</sup> Ground Truth Solutions. September 2020. “Key Informant interviews with refugee community leaders in Uganda.” [https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID\\_19\\_bulletin\\_uganda-R2.pdf](https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID_19_bulletin_uganda-R2.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



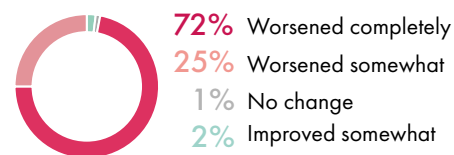
“Our people are now very relaxed and even those with the facilities no longer wash their hands, saying they don’t have soap. There is a need to provide sanitisers so that people will be motivated to use them with ease.” – Female refugee leader, Rhino refugee settlement, November 2020

### Breakdown of rumours downplaying the virus<sup>5</sup>

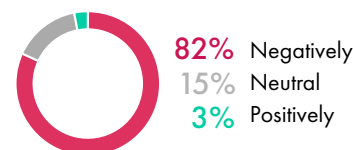


\* Other includes the rumour that only those with tuberculosis and diabetes, people with disabilities, and truck drivers contract the virus.

### Within your community, how has the ability to meet basic needs changed since Covid-19 started spreading?



### How do you feel the Covid-19 crisis has impacted social relationships/relationships in your community?<sup>8</sup>



A male community leader in Rwamwanja refugee settlement in southwestern Uganda told us, “the government should work hand in hand with aid agencies to start income-generating activities for these people to be kept busy. For example, brick laying, mushroom planting, and chicken rearing. The major cause of this challenge is poverty; some people have started killing each other” (September 2020). In later consultations, leaders recommended programmes to empower women through vocational training courses, in order to reduce cases of GBV.

A key barrier to addressing GBV, according to community leaders, is the lack of law enforcement and support. This prevents victims from coming forward and reporting cases. Many leaders told us that the government and local authorities should punish perpetrators by enforcing laws when GBV occurs, in order to reduce such incidents.

A male community leader in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement in northwestern Uganda called on authorities to “enforce laws that are against gender-based violence because the cases of rape, defilement, and teenage pregnancy are very alarming. The government needs to make sure perpetrators are punished; parents who cover up such acts and girls who refuse to help with investigations should be punished so that others can learn. Sometimes the perpetrators are released without the victims receiving justice” (September 2020).

Many perpetrators of GBV repeatedly commit violent offences after being released, which disincentivises those affected by GBV to report cases. A male community leader in Parolinya refugee settlement in North Western Uganda said, “There must be a mechanism for the resettlement of perpetrators after they have returned from the courts, because at the moment they are just left to come back into communities without any follow-up being conducted, so they just start their criminality again.”

### **Recommendations for preventing GBV**

- Increase humanitarian assistance
- Invest in livelihood programmes for refugees
- Introduce vocational training for women
- Enforce punishment for perpetrators
- Follow up on perpetrators reintroduced to communities

### **Children suffer disproportionately from the pandemic**

Leaders have identified children as a vulnerable group during Covid-19 because they are missing out on education and living in increasingly unstable economic environments. Leaders called on aid agencies and the government to provide learning packages, including study exercises and reading material for children, as a way to lessen the impact of Covid-19. In addition to these learning packages, community leaders told us in November that teachers should provide more guidance and supervision of learning programmes to support both children and parents while schools remain partially closed. One way of doing this could be by providing families with televisions and radios to access educational programmes. However, this may not be suitable for all. One female refugee leader in Kyaka II noted, “Some children were given radios to benefit from the education lessons conducted on local radio stations, although they didn’t benefit much because of the language barrier” (November 2020).

During interviews in November, leaders suggested that older children be provided with vocational training to minimise child pregnancies and early marriages, as it would occupy them and also allow them to buy essential items (including sanitary goods). Early marriage and prostitution would therefore not be seen as necessary to meet basic needs. Training in areas such as carpentry, tailoring, hairdressing, and basket weaving was suggested.

Leaders highlighted their role in supporting and encouraging parents during Covid-19. Parents are under increased stress and leaders can share this burden by passing on parenting skills, helping parents emphasise the importance of Covid-19 preventative measures, and guiding them on how to support their children with sex education. In Bidi Bidi, a community leader explained that she will “continue to educate parents and my community; for example, I hold weekly meetings with women and give them parenting tips on how to bring up their children well” (September 2020).



“The cash assistance given to children caused domestic violence in Imvepi, where the husband killed the wife over the cash meant for children’s activities. The husband claimed that the child belonged to him so he should be given the money. In Rhino refugee settlement, some men received cash assistance during distribution and ran away with it, leaving the family to suffer.” – Female refugee leader, Rhino refugee settlement, November 2020



“I agree with the findings. There’s a need to provide vocational training skills in order to avoid early marriage and teenage pregnancy among young people because currently many are idle and engage in bad habits. For example, we recently had a case where a 15-year-old boy made a 14-year-old girl pregnant, which is a very painful story.” – Female refugee leader, Kiryandongo, November 2020

Leaders also offered help to aid agencies, as a male leader from Parolinya told us that “Leaders can also help in supervising and mobilising children in their communities whenever an instructor wants to meet children and share reading material or provide counselling on education” (September 2020).

### **Recommendations for supporting children and parents**

- Provide learning packages including reading materials, exercises, and activities for children
- Provide teacher guidance and supervision of learning programmes
- Provide television sets and radios to access educational programmes, language permitting
- Provide vocational training for older children to prevent child pregnancies and early marriages
- Support parents by passing on parenting skills, helping parents emphasise the importance of Covid-19 preventative measures, and guiding them on how to support their children with sex education
- Mobilise children for classes, learning material distribution, and supervision

### **Refugee and host community relations are under strain**

Refugee leaders noted increased tension between refugees and their host communities as a result of the heavier economic burden faced by all. They suggested that the Ugandan government and local authorities provide them with conflict-resolution facilitation and training. A male community leader in Bidi Bidi suggested that government and local authorities “conduct regular community meetings where people come together and talk about issues affecting the community and families and come up with solutions” (September 2020).

Authorities must play a strong role in providing security within communities to improve social relationships, according to community leaders. Proper law-enforcement to ensure refugees feel safe would deter those who feel compelled to return to South Sudan, due to the precarious situation in Uganda, from doing so.

Aid agencies should continue to implement programmes which benefit both the refugee and host communities, leaders suggested. As a male refugee in Adjumani refugee settlement in northwestern Uganda explained, “There are vulnerable groups in the host community too who really need the same kind of support offered to the refugees and if they are helped it will portray a good image and encourage peaceful co-existence” (November 2020).

Community leaders also suggested refugees should be provided with alternative fuel such as charcoal briquettes to reduce tension over firewood with the Ugandan host community. Additional land should also be provided to refugees to allow them to cultivate their own food and for their livestock to have enough space to graze.

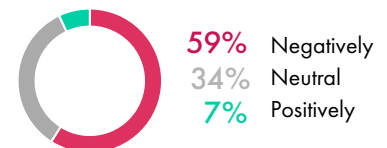
### **Recommendations for reducing tensions with host communities**

- Offer conflict-resolution facilitation training to leaders
- Enforce laws properly to help refugee communities feel safe in Uganda
- Demonstrate the benefit of aid programmes to both refugees and host communities
- Provide alternative fuels to refugees to reduce competition over firewood
- Provide refugees with additional land for cultivation and livestock grazing

### **Leaders need more consultation with aid providers**

Community leaders were thankful that their feedback to aid providers about a lack of washing facilities had been considered and had resulted in action. A male community leader in Rhino refugee settlements in northwestern Uganda told us, “We raised our concerns to aid partners that soap and water was needed in the communities and they responded accordingly so we are happy with this” (September 2020). Feedback from community leaders is also being used to identify the most vulnerable within communities and understand their particular needs.

### **How do you feel the Covid-19 crisis has impacted relationships with the Ugandan host community?<sup>9</sup>**



<sup>9</sup> Ground Truth Solutions. September 2020. “Key Informant interviews with refugee community leaders in Uganda.” [https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID\\_19\\_bulletin\\_uganda-R2.pdf](https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID_19_bulletin_uganda-R2.pdf)

However, the need remains to consult community leaders on planned activities so they can advise aid providers and be informed of projects. In Rwamwanja, a leader explained that he feels “organisations don’t consult us because they feel they have enough information regarding the communities, so they implement their programmes in isolation, especially regarding Covid-19. I think we should be given a chance to work jointly with organisation staff in sensitising people to this pandemic” (September 2020).

Informing and training local leaders would allow them to better serve their communities and share information on activities and Covid-19 prevention measures. Simply conducting one-off training was insufficient according to several leaders, a male leader from Adjumani explained that “leaders need continuous refresher training sessions on precautionary measures and management of the virus because we were only trained once when the pandemic had just begun, which was not sufficient, so most of us receive additional knowledge from the radio” (September 2020).

Equipped with timely information on Covid-19, community leaders could be better utilised in sensitisation efforts and information-sharing as they are familiar with the target community, the local languages, and are well trusted within settlements. This is not to downplay the pivotal role that NGOs currently play in sharing information with communities, as leaders themselves noted that NGOs were the primary source of information for refugees on Covid-19 and also, for some, the most trusted information source in general. South Sudanese and Congolese refugee leaders responded differently in this respect. South Sudanese refugee leaders said that community groups were the most trusted information sources, whereas Congolese refugee leaders pointed to NGOs, local government, and UN agencies as the most trusted sources for health updates and information.<sup>10</sup>

Leaders also said in November that it is essential they be supported by aid agencies in their community sensitisation efforts. Airtime and transportation facilitation (bicycles, motorcycles, cars) would mean they could easily access community members.

### **Recommendations from community leaders**

- Improve aid agency consultation of community leaders over planned activities
- Offer regular training sessions for local leaders on Covid-19 prevention measures
- Utilise leaders for Covid-19 community sensitisation drives
- Provide support to leaders through airtime and transportation facilitation

<sup>10</sup> Ground Truth Solutions. September 2020. “Key Informant interviews with refugee community leaders in Uganda.” [https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID\\_19\\_bulletin\\_uganda-R2.pdf](https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID_19_bulletin_uganda-R2.pdf)



“We [community leaders] are always consulted in identifying vulnerable people, although some aid providers sometimes don’t integrate them in implementing activities. In the period of Covid-19, we have been consulted and our advice has been taken by aid providers.” – Female refugee leader, Kyaka II, November 2020



“We leaders are most exposed to the risks of Covid-19, more so than other community members. Therefore, there is a need to provide sanitisers and some incentives in terms of facilitation, such as airtime and transport; even a car requires fuel to move.” – Male refugee leader, Palorinya, November 2020

## About this report

This report presents highlights from Ground Truth Solutions' (GTS) recent Covid-19 interviews conducted with refugee community leaders. The goal is to share refugees' views and recommendations during the Covid-19 pandemic with humanitarian actors on the ground to inform the response and adjust programming accordingly.

### Sampling methodology

The data presented here is indicative and does not statistically represent the perceptions of the whole refugee population or of humanitarian workers in Uganda.

Phone interviews were conducted with 100 South Sudanese and Congolese community leaders in Adjumani, Bidi Bidi, Imvepi, Palorinya, Rhino, Kiryandongo Kyaka II, Kyangwali, Nakivale, and Rwamwanja refugee settlements for each round.

The community leaders who participated in these key informant interviews over the telephone had earlier participated in face-to-face community dialogue sessions across the 10 refugee settlements in March and June 2020. Participants were selected on the basis of their availability, their willingness to participate, and the practical constraints of mobile network coverage.

### Survey questions

Ground Truth Solutions designed the interview questions based on the key themes and issues identified in the first two rounds. For round three we focused on sharing the findings from the first two rounds and asking for specific recommendations based on some of the challenges identified. For round four we used the interview to share a summary of the recommendations captured and ask for any additional suggestions from leaders.

### Participants

All participants were over the age of 18 and South Sudanese (60%) or Congolese refugees (40%) in their respective settlements for both rounds. Female leaders made up 45% and male leaders 55% of key informant interviewees in round three and 48% female 52% male in round four.

### Language of the interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted in Kiswahili and English.

### Dates of data collection

Key informant interviews took place from 26 August – 2 September 2020 for round three and from 22–28 November 2020 for the fourth round.

### Data collection partner

Centre for Integrated Research and Community Development Uganda (CIRCODU) supervisors who have worked with Ground Truth Solutions on several projects were selected to conduct the key informant interviews after participating in a remote training workshop.

### Challenges and limitations

The main challenge was the inability to reach community leaders due to poor network coverage or phones being switched off. This required the enumerators to reschedule the interviews at set times with community leaders, or make several calls until the respondents could be reached, or both reschedule and make several calls.

### Data collection tool

Kobo Collect was used for the interviews across all rounds.

### Author

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