

# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT: VOICE SPACE AND CAPACITY IN ARUA, UGANDA**

Funded by the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme

Administered by the International Inequalities Institute at the London School  
of Economics and Political Science

EXTERNAL REPORT  
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Department of  
Geography and  
Environment





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## Abstract

*This project investigates the emergence of social media and digital communication as platforms for urban poor and refugee voices, and their capacities to produce, understand and inhabit space in Arua, a major city in Northern Uganda. As involuntary migration to cities increases and socio-economic disparities grow world-wide, this research – part of a larger project across three continents – contributes to the discourse on social media and governance in complex and changing urban environments. Social media can impact (dis)information asymmetries that transcends physical space, with potential to both mitigate or increase inequalities between residents. In Arua, a growing city with fluid populations and a plethora of local and international actors, we wish to examine the role of social media and its potential for providing opportunities for youth in the city; among hosts as well as refugees.*

*The role of social media as both an enabler and excluder in conditions of crises is an under-researched area. Information technology shapes social relations that potentially lead to inequalities between those who have access to information and those who do not. This project therefore examines how social media can be used to navigate the terrain between humanitarianism and inequality in Uganda. The project will investigate the contention that social and communications media play a key role in alleviating and exacerbating inequalities. It seeks to assess and better understand how social and communications media are tools of self-organisation that not only help displaced and migrants arrive in cities, access housing, jobs, and transportation, but also how it might help host populations access the same. This report suggests that social media does play a part in exacerbating differences between youth populations in Arua, but against the contextual backdrop of conflict and the historical underdevelopment of the West Nile region, the dividing lines are not clear cut between refugee and host youth groups. Instead, dividing lines tend to run between those with access to schooling and prospects of a dignified future, and those that have been forced to drop out of school to follow low-paying livelihood opportunities. And while Arua has come a long way from its troubled past, it would seem the city still lacks in providing opportunities to its youth. As a result, they are – with the assistance of social media – seeking futures elsewhere.*

## Key terms and definitions

**Refugee:** As defined by the 1951 Geneva convention, a refugee is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. Within this study's context, refugee refers to both registered refugees and unregistered refugees, unless otherwise stated and are largely refugees from South Sudan.

**Migrant:** An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students (IOM, 2019). For the purpose of this study, respondents that have self-identified as migrants are largely seasonal migrants who are moving between Arua and another location(s).

**Host community:** UNHRC defines host community as the country of asylum and the local, regional and national governmental, social and economic structures within which refugees live. For the purpose of this study, respondents that have self-identified as host community are from Arua, meaning that they were born there or have lived most their lives there.

**Nationals:** For the purpose of this study, nationals refer to Ugandan citizens, regardless of where they come from in the country. Respondents distinguished between Ugandan ethnicities and differences in languages when need be, but never used "host"/"migrant" distinctions. Respondents did however distinguish between nationals (Ugandans) and refugees (South Sudanese). Where appropriate, we have therefore used the term "nationals" as a collective term for Ugandans.

**Youth:** While there are varying definitions for which age brackets youth fits into, for the purpose of this research, youth is defined between 16 and 30 years.

**Social media:** A computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities. We have, where appropriate, distinguished between social media like Facebook and *digital communication* platforms like WhatsApp (Investopedia, 2023).

**Arua City:** Granted city status in April 2020, Arua city is located within Arua district and is made up of 49 wards. In the context of this study, the geographical scope has been limited to 6 wards that comprise the centre of the city.

## Introduction

Centrally located in Uganda's West Nile Province, Arua is an urban island of relative security for people escaping conflict. However, affected by instability in Northern Uganda and in neighbouring DRC and South Sudan, the province has been a source of extraction and exploitation by colonial and post-colonial regimes (Leopold, 2005). Suffering from underinvestment and few opportunities, the province served as a hotbed for rebellions in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Atkinson 2009). As the situation stabilised during the 2000s, Arua's position as a migratory hub was strengthened (Dawa, 2020). Today, Arua fashions itself as vibrant and inclusive (Arua City, 2023). The city is home to 120 000 people including approximately 12% refugees (AVSI Foundation, City of Arua, Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021), 10% migrants (Nyegenye et al, 2021) as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees from DRC. This makes Arua a city where disparate socio-political backgrounds, allegiances, and goals are brought together by necessity.

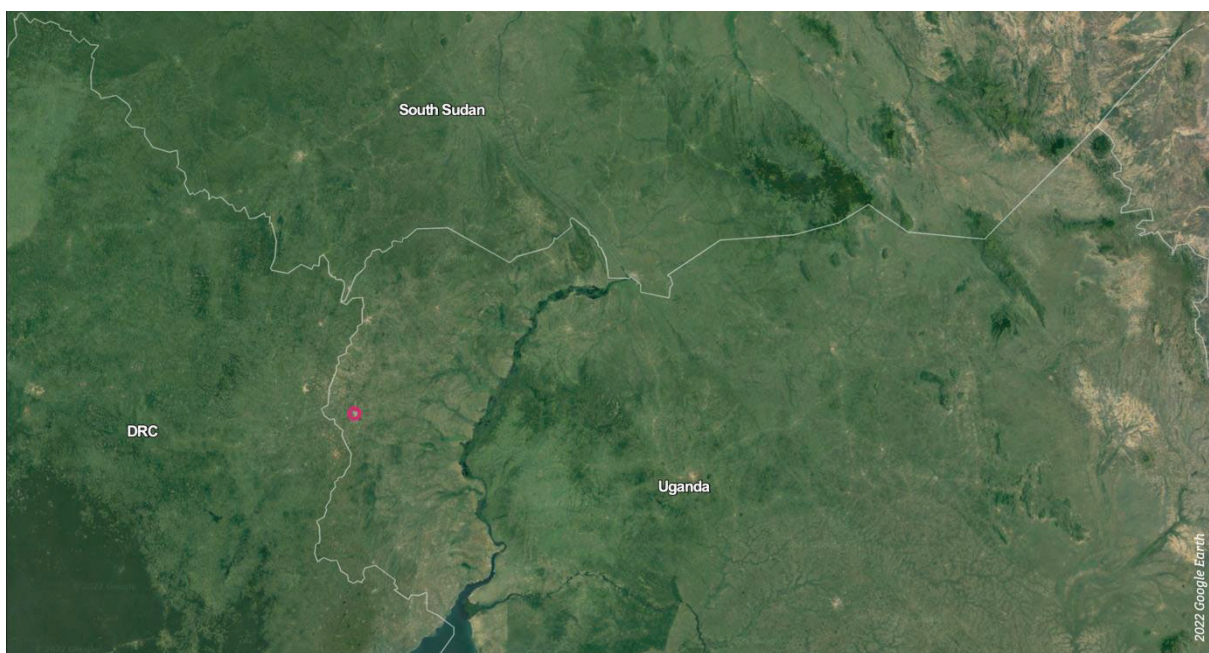


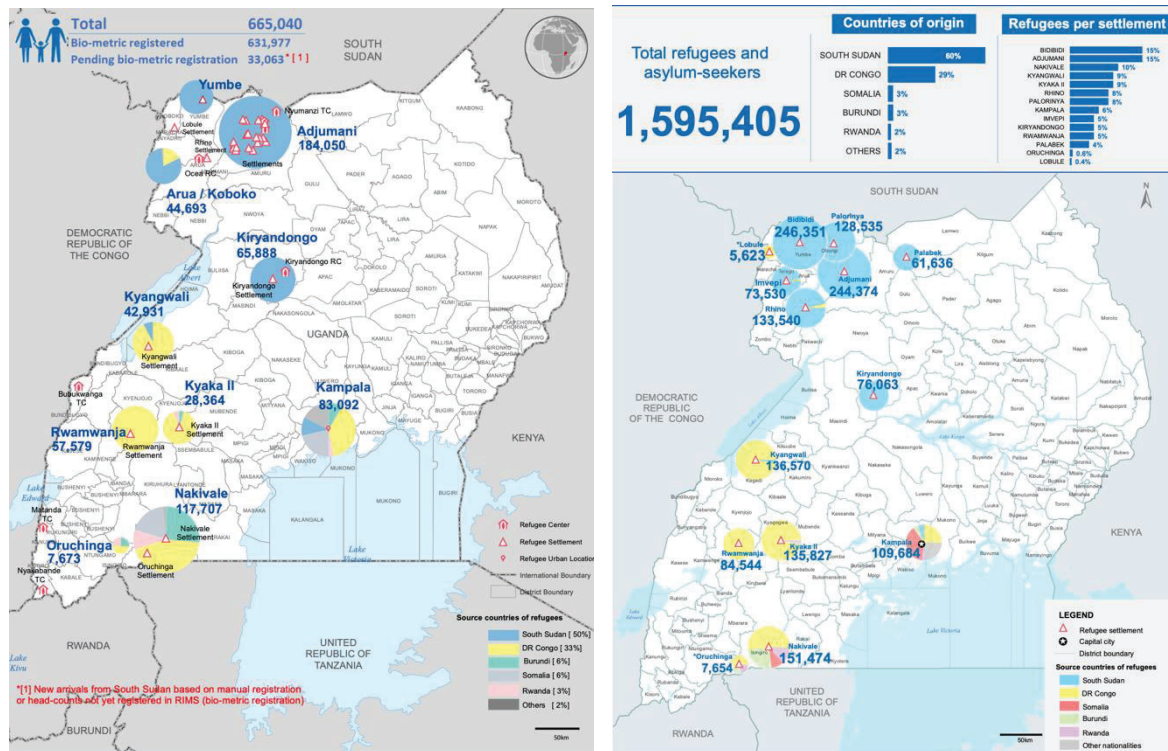
Figure 1: Arua in the regional context. Source: Google © 2022, CNES/Airbus Maxar Technologies

In this project the social media practices of young refugees and Ugandans living in Arua are in focus. Two central questions are sought answered: Can we better understand how social media and digital communication are used by and affecting refugee and Ugandan youths' access to opportunities related to schooling, work, services, and livelihoods? And how can Oxfam, one of the partners in this project, make use of this information, e.g., to make their own social media and digital communication more precisely tuned as a part of their strategy to engage with refugee and host youth?

To come to grips with the overarching questions posed above, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the situation for refugees in Uganda and specifically in Arua, while also providing an overview of the physical, social, economic, and historical context of Arua and the West Nile region.

## Refugees in Uganda

Over the last 20 years, Uganda’s relative stability and progressive refugee policies have made it a growing destination for refugees and asylum seekers, with an estimated 1.6 million Persons of Concern<sup>1</sup> in September 2021 (UNHCR 2022). This includes people fleeing conflict and instability in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi. The influxes of refugees have aggravated the need for a comprehensive understanding of the humanitarian situation and the provision of services for refugees living both in dedicated refugee settlements as well as in urban settings. Furthermore, information on the impacts of the changing demographics on host communities is in greater demand.



*Figures 2 a) and b): Country wide maps of refugee settlements and refugee numbers from UNHCR in 2016 (left) and 2022 (right). The maps show how refugees in Uganda have doubled over six years, with most new refugees gravitating towards the northwest of the country. The maps also show that the majority of refugees currently are South Sudanese, but that refugees from other neighbouring countries historically have been present (and still are, although percentage wise fewer). Source: Government of Uganda and UNHCR 2016, and ibid 2022.*

The Ugandan Refugee Act (2006) and the Ugandan Refugee Regulations (2010) states that refugees have freedom of movement, right to work, own property, and to access national services in Uganda. However, refugees are only considered refugees if they are living within settlements or are legally registered in Kampala. Approximately 94 percent of registered refugees live in refugee settlements and only 6 percent in urban areas (UNHCR, 2022). In addition, there are an unknown number of unregistered urban refugees. For example, UNHCR reports that are around 92,000 refugees living in Kampala, while the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) estimates the actual number is around 300,000 (Easton-Calabria, E. et al, 2022).

Refugees are allowed to move in and out of the settlements, however as set out in the Refugee Act, refugees who live outside of the provided settlements do not qualify for humanitarian assistance from the government and the UNHCR (Easton-Calabria, E. *et al*, 2022; Addaney, 2017). This include both

<sup>1</sup> Refugees, returnees, stateless people, internally displaced and asylum seekers.

refugees who move out of refugee settlements and those who do not register in the place where they arrive, such as those moving directly to urban areas - called self-settled refugees. Living in urban areas while being registered in camps is not technically permitted, yet many refugees apply this strategy. While refugees in Kampala city can receive a refugee identification card and letter outlining their right to work (Monteith and Lwasa, 2017), refugees self-settled in secondary cities do not have this option. This policy is a measure to avoid creating additional pull-factors to cities (Easton-Calabria, E. et al, 2022).

Since the Refugee Act, several frameworks and plans have been introduced with the aim to support self-reliance strategies through integration of refugees into institutional structures and improved access livelihoods, healthcare, financings etc (Easton-Calabria, E. et al, 2022). While the UN and INOGs usually focus their support on refugee settlements with limited/no implementation in cities besides Kampala, strategic document such as the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (CRR) January 2019 – December 2020 recognises the need to support urban refugees (UNHCR 2019). Identifying urban refugees as one of five priority outcomes from planning and programming, the 2019-2020 RRP states that it *will prioritize better assessments of refugees in urban areas, more engagement with municipal actors, and enhanced support to refugees and hosting communities in these areas, resources permitting.* (UNHCR 2019, p.33). The presence of refugees in secondary cities are thus adding additional pressure on already overstretched service delivery in many urban areas. Contributing factors is the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in the population count that serves as the basis for funding allocation from central government to municipalities, as well as the governance structure where refugee issues are being addressed at district rather than municipal level (Easton-Calabria, E. et al, 2022).



Figure 3: Rhino Camp. Lack of urban markets and livelihood options in the camps mean that many refugees with urban backgrounds relocate to cities like Arua. Photo: Lomoraronald/CC BY-SA 4.0

### *Institutional and social barriers to livelihoods*

Betts et al (2017) use the conceptual framework of ‘refugee economies’ to examine what shapes the production, consumption, finance, and exchange activities of refugees, and variation in economic outcomes for refugees in Uganda. This framework is based on the premise that it is institutional features, not inherent characteristics of refugees vis-à-vis migrants or host community members, that shape their economic lives and interaction with markets. Three sets of institutions are identified as impacting refugees’ opportunities and constraints to participate in markets: state and international governance; formal and informal sectors; and national and transnational economies. Such institutional barriers to access income generating opportunities for refugees include prohibitively expensive work permits; the non-recognition of foreign qualifications; cost of business licence; challenges to access to banking (formally employed refugees must submit a signed letter of employment and present a refugee ID card. Self-employed must obtain a recommendation letter from a refugee already with a bank account at the same bank); and lack of credit (requirement of collateral for loans and the perceived flight risk).

The Refugee Act states that refugees have the right to work just like *aliens in similar circumstance* (Government of Uganda, 2006). However, there is a gap in the national regulatory frameworks for the protection of the rights of refugees residing in urban settings. The legal ambiguity around work permits has led to different sectors of government holding different views on whether refugees do or do not need to apply for work permits in the country (Ruaudel and Morrison-Métois, 2017). Addaney (2017) suggests that the Immigration Department wrongfully interprets aliens in similar circumstances to mean that refugees require work permits just as aliens require work permits to enter the country. On the other hand, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) asserts that once a refugee is in the country, he or she is granted a de facto right to work (Women’s Refugee Commission 2011: 9). This inconsistency of interpretation creates varied enforcement of the regulations that guide employment of refugees and often makes employers wary of hiring refugees (Buscher 2011: 25; Macchiavello 2003: 11; Women’s Refugee Commission 2011: 9). Further, Monteith, Lwasa et al (2017) point out that while the 2006 Refugee Act grants refugees the rights to live, work and own land in urban areas, discrimination makes this difficult for many. This includes legal discrimination from authorities who are unaware of refugees’ rights, and economic and social discrimination among e.g., local populations including landlords and local business owners (ibid, Landau and Duponchel 2011: 13; Grabska 2005; Landau 2004; Jacobsen 2005).

Uganda has a very high rate of entrepreneurial activities and a high number of start-ups. In 2015, 28% of adults owned or co-owned a new business. Most businesses are small and informal, with low growth expectations, low employment effect and high discontinuation rate. Contributing to this is a lack of access to financing; only 6% of young entrepreneurs cite financial institutions as the source of their capital, and 11% had received business support from schemes. Moreover, there is high under- and unemployment, with estimated youth unemployment of 80%. More than 50% of investments in 2012 were done by foreigners, mostly from South Asia.

Easton-Calabria and Omata argue that refugees often lack access to the finance necessary for entrepreneurship and income generation (2016). As a result, refugee entrepreneurs are rarely able to access the larger markets needed to achieve self-reliance, let alone create additional jobs. However, as Betts et al’s study shows, access to financial capital to start businesses varies greatly between nationalities, depending on social and economic support networks. This is also reflected in ethnic clustering in certain parts of economic sectors or labour markets. The significance of social networks for refugees’ economic situation is further amplified due to the lack of access to humanitarian support in Ugandan cities.

## Arua City

Against the backdrop of influx of refugees in the north-west of the country, this project focuses on young refugees in Arua City. Arua is located in Arua District in the north-western corner of Uganda. Bordering DRC to the west and South Sudan to the north this part of Uganda, known as West Nile, has seen a range of historical conflicts, both in colonial and post-colonial eras, resulting in large numbers of refugees and displaced people either moving into or out of the region. Today, the area to the west of the Nile is comprised of 11 districts, of which Arua is one. These 11 districts host six of the country's largest refugee settlements, in addition to the many refugees who are living in urban areas, such as Arua. Given its geographical position and the current political situation in the wider region, most refugees residing in Arua and surrounding districts are South Sudanese, and a smaller share Congolese.

Founded by the British in 1914, Arua town bears the marks of classical colonial town layouts. Says Leopold:

*"The site chosen by Weatherhead apparently on the advice of the experienced Sudan administrator C H Stigland. It had not been a place of any significant settlement, but there were local stories about its precolonial past, and it seems to have been close to the site of a small Belgian base." (2005, 31).*

With an annual urbanisation rate of 5.7 in 2012, Uganda's urban population was expected to increase from 25% to 45% by 2050 (World Bank, 2012). To plan for this transitions Arua alongside 14 other towns was granted city status by the Government of Uganda (GoU) in 2019. Arua officially became a city in 2020, whereby its city boundaries increased from 10.5km<sup>2</sup> to 414km<sup>2</sup> and the local authorities now administer a population which has "grown" from around 62,000 persons (in Arua Central Division) in 2016 to a projected population of more than 341,000 in Arua City in 2020 (Arua City, 2023). The change of status for Arua from town to city, and the reorganisation and investments that go into such a change, have potential impacts on perceptions; that of local residents, future prospects, and identities (West Nile having been a marginalised province); and that of refugees looking to avoid settlements by seeking urban areas to establish new roots.

Arua City is divided into two administrative divisions, Arua Hill and Oli Division. Each of the two divisions is formed by three wards, or neighbourhoods. Kenya, Mvara and Bazaar in Arua Hill, and Pangisa, Tanganyika and Awindiri in the Oli Division.

Arua Hill has since colonial times been the wealthiest part of town and is where most services and businesses are located. Meanwhile, the Oli Division has historically been the workers' quarter, where informal workers, migrants and refugees have settled due to its lower costs (Capici, 2021). There is high inequality in access to services, jobs, housing etc between the two areas.

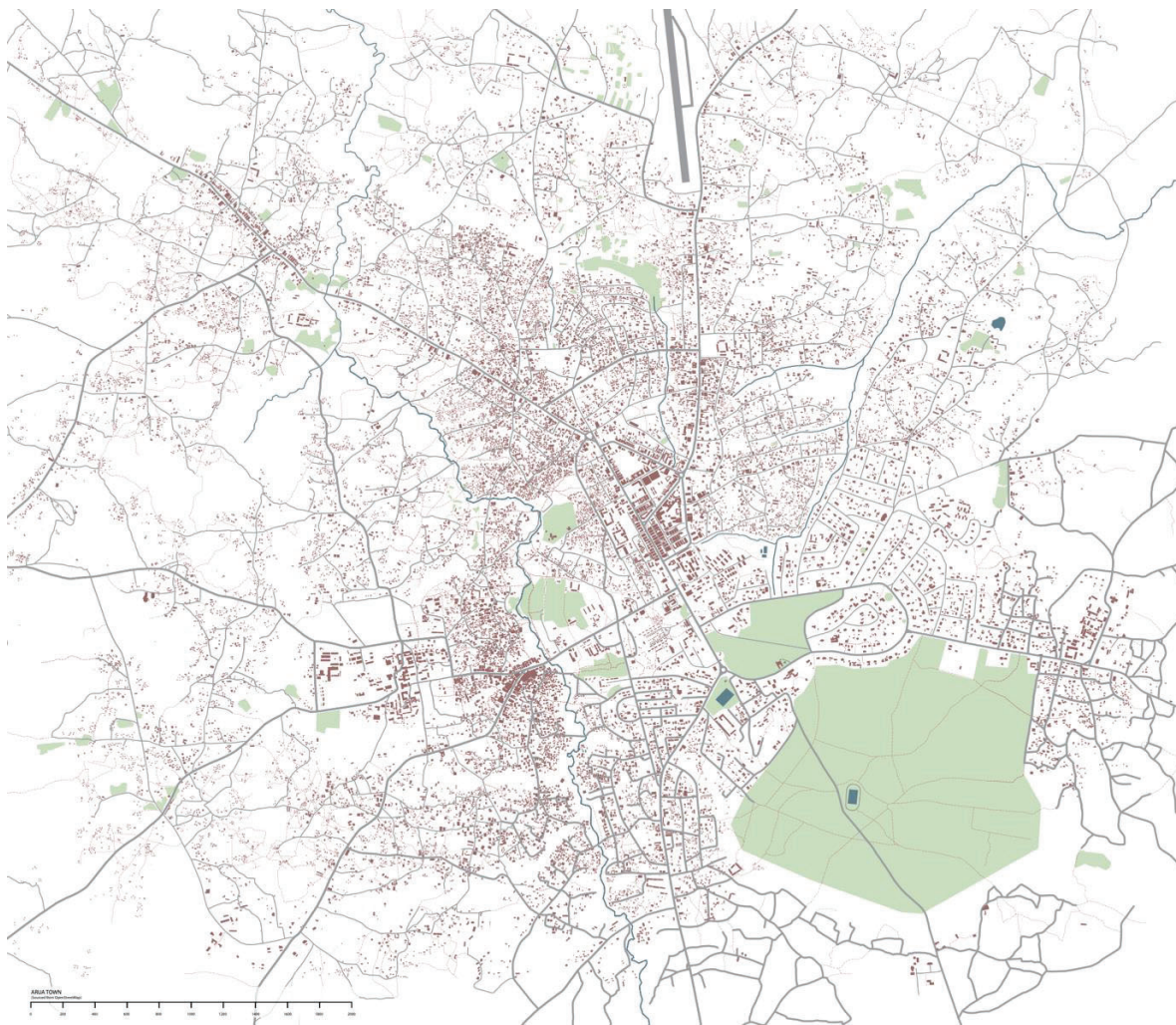


Figure 4: Arua town, showing buildings, urban green spaces, roads, and paths. Source: OpenStreetMap, 2022.

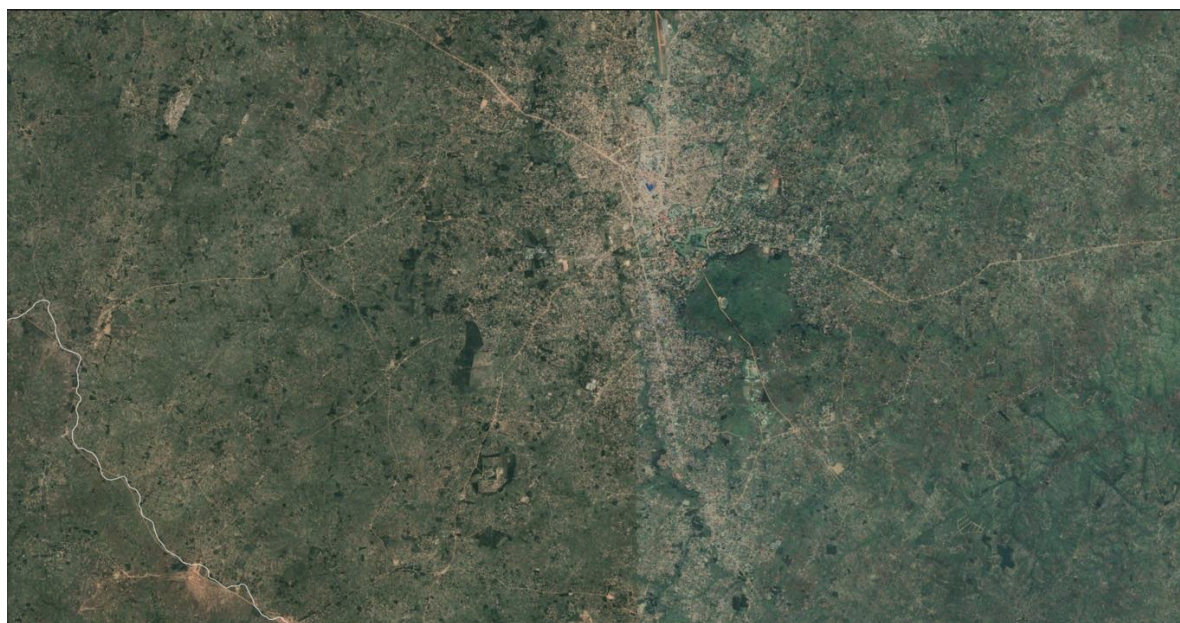


Figure 5: Aerial view of Arua city, showing proximity to DRC border. Maps data: Google © 2022, CNES/Airbus Maxar Technologies

### Population

According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), Arua *district* had a total population of 641,889 in 2014 with a projected population of 751,000 in 2020 of which 52% are female.<sup>2</sup> According to the 2014 National Population and Housing Census final report by Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), Arua *City* had a population of 309,052 where Arua Central Division had 61,962 residents in 10,202 households (avg. of 6 people/household), and Ayivu Division had 247,090 residents in 46,380 households (avg. of 5 people/household). According to the census the Central Division of Arua City has a population of 67,940, (AVSI Foundation, City of Arua, Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Arua has a relatively small population considering that 12 million of Uganda's 46 million citizens live in cities. For comparison, Arua's population is not even 2% of the estimated population in Kampala. But most cities in Uganda are, like Arua, small urban centres. Importantly, Arua is the largest city in a region that holds the largest proportion of refugees in the country.

Despite the lack of humanitarian support for refugees living outside settlements, there is a trend of increased self-settlement in cities in the West Nile region (Capici, 2021). Research from Kampala suggests that this trend can be attributed to refugees fleeing urban areas in South Sudan who may have little knowledge of farming seek urban areas rather than rural camps. Others have lived in settlements but decide to leave due to either untenable situations in the camp, or prospects of better services and access to markets in the city (Bernstein and Okello, 2007: 50).

Arua district hosts 200,000 registered refugees (UNHCR, 2020). According to Easton-Calabria and Lozet (2021), the district hosts a *total* of 250,000 South Sudanese refugees. UNHCR estimates that out of the 50,000 or so South Sudanese refugees who have self-settled in Arua district, 85% are women and children (2018). In Arua City, just over 7,000 (10%) of the population are refugees (AVSI Foundation, City of Arua, Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Self-settled refugees do not, according to the 2006 Refugee Act, qualify for humanitarian assistance from the Ugandan government or UNHCR. However, many refugees operate in a dual mode. Some commute to cities like Arua to work, then go back to settlements where they are registered, like Rhino or Impevi, to get food rations and see their families. Others reside in Arua and depend on monthly trips back to collect their rations (Easton-Calabria and Lozet, 2021).

Arua is characterised by high ethnic diversity. The Lugbara are in majority, constituting 81% of the population, but other ethnicities, including Alur, Kakwa, Madi, Indians, Sudanese, Congolese, Bantu, Langi, and Acholi also live in Arua. Capici (2021) found that most refugees from South Sudan belong to Equatorial tribes, such as Kakwas, Kukus, Pajulu, who are Barre speaking with stronger bonds to Lugbara tribes, and further that there is an exclusion of the two historically rival tribes, Dinka and Nueri, from networks. The 1995 Ugandan Constitution grants the traditional and cultural institutions power to unite and so the Lugbara Cultural institution (Lugbara Kari) was born. In addition to this ethnic mixture, people of Asian and Arab descent have lived in the city since it was founded, with the later influx of Sudanese and Congolese peoples.

*"In Arua (...) I found a spectrum of blended or hybridised variations of (...) cultural modes. Part of the reason for such a mixture, in the case of Arua, is precisely its relationship with its rural hinterland. This is linked not only to the social disruption caused by the refugee experience (and earlier migrations), but also to the continuing poverty of the district and the sporadic violence in the countryside. The town represents a place to trade, to seek*

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<sup>2</sup> UBOS population data in Arua and other secondary cities in Uganda do not include refugees.

*refuge, to pass through in search of work elsewhere or to hang around to find out what is happening". (Leopold, 2005: 35-36)*

As Figure 6 shows, nation state borders – as many other places in East Africa – effectively cut across a number of ethnic identities in the region.

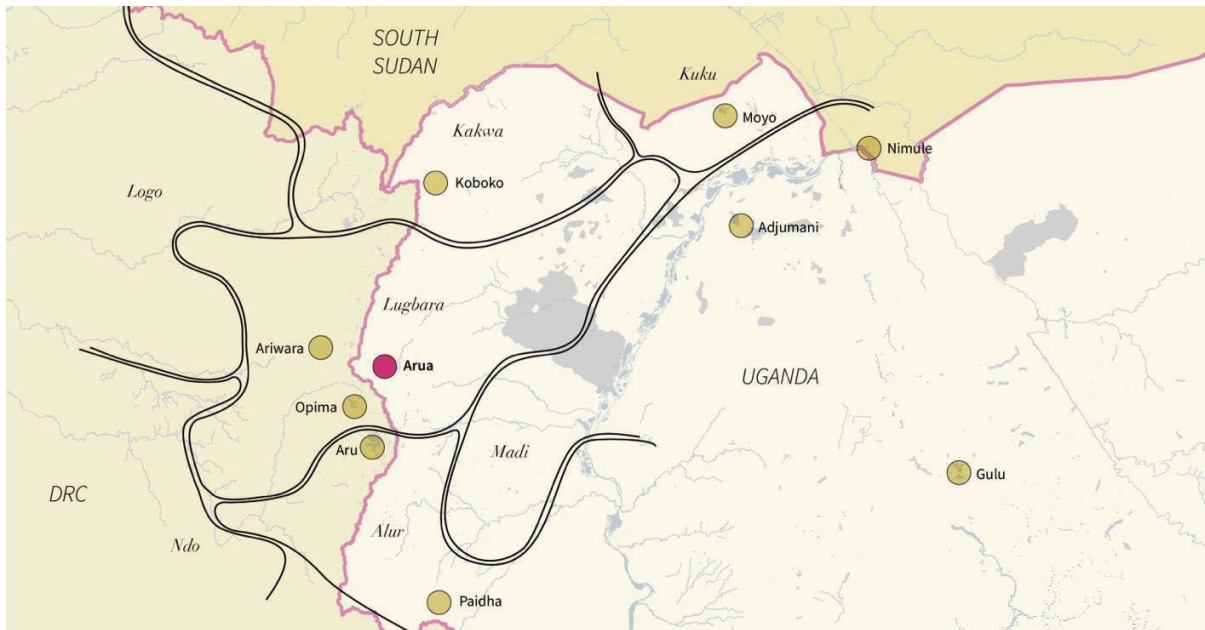


Figure 6: West Nile region, and neighbouring areas in DRC and South Sudan, showing major urban centres (yellow), areas designated for refugee settlements (grey), and cross border identities (black lines). Source: Authors, 2023.

In terms of religion, the majority of residents in Ayivu Division are Christians, while Muslims are dominant in Arua Central Division. Middleton commented in 1971 that:

*"Arua town is a town of almost 8,000 inhabitants, most of whom are Moslem (...) known as Nubi and maintain that they are the descendants of Emin Pasha's troops (...). In fact, there are very few of these men left, and most Nubi are Lugbara, Alur, Kakwa (...). The Nubis form a markedly distinct population: besides being Muslim and having their own school, they deal in hides and skins and follow other urban occupations" (44-5, quoted in Leopold, 2005, 33).*

Linguistically, Equatorian people (e.g. Kakwas, Kukus, Pajulu) from South Sudan are all Barre speakers who therefore share stronger bonds with Lugbara people. The two historically rival groups in South Sudan, the Dinka and Nueri, speaking Nilotic languages, are found to be excluded from support networks.

#### *Economic sectors and livelihood opportunities in Arua and surrounding area*

Like many districts in Uganda, the economy of Arua depends mainly on agriculture which employs over 87.7% of the households. Of those employed in agriculture, 86.2% are engaged in the crop sector and less than 1% in animal rearing and fishing respectively. According to the 2014 census, only 3.6% of the households earned their livelihoods from formal employment, and less than 2% from the cottage industry or are dependent on family support and other miscellaneous activities. Many take on a variety of roles to

make a living. Research from the late 1990s points that: “most people in Arua town get by, in most years, with a complex mixture of livelihoods strategies, manipulating membership in various networks and inhabiting more than one social world” (Leopold, 2005: 43).

The 1990s and early 2000s studies of Arua’s economic sectors shows that “the *magendo* trade (cross border smuggling but applied more widely) probably accounts for most of the real economy in Arua (...). They depict, from very different perspectives, an informal sector out of control, dominating every other sector of economic life in the country, from subsistence farming to the activities of the senior civil servants, and generating its own class structures” (Leopold 2005, 40). Meagher’s research from the 1990s argues that Arua’s location makes it a prime centre for (illegal) cross border trade and how this connects to long standing economic practices in the region. Leopold (2006: 34) sheds further light on these networks:

“[Arua’s] social and economic dynamics bear the traces of earlier times, as well as the more recent past. As Meagher recognises, Arua’s international trade networks, formal and informal, follow patterns laid down before British rule, particularly in the post-contact period but also earlier. Both economically and socially, Arua town is closely linked into its rural hinterland: through trade, migration (forced and unforced, in so far as the distinction makes any sense in this context) and family and other social ties. Similar networks also link the town into the wider world. (...) A study of Arua town therefore, cannot adopt the hard dichotomy between the urban and rural, the modern and traditional”.

Traders largely depend on their personal contacts with relatives, friends, and co-ethnic groups to mitigate the risk in economic transactions (Konings 2005; Taneja and Pohit 2001: 2263). In the case of Arua and the Uganda-South Sudan border, small-scale traders from Uganda have become increasingly vulnerable to assertions of South Sudan state authority and a space characterised by inconclusive peace. While cross-border trade has brought substantial profits for some, it has increased inequalities and instability for those who do not have access to power structures (Schomerus and Titeca, 2012). Further, regulation of licences has led to inflation in food prices and loss of livelihoods (Easton-Calabria and Lozet, 2020).



*Figure 7: Bodabodas (motorcycles) are popular for transportation of goods and people in Arua. They are also used for illegal cross border trade. Photo: Africraigs (CC BY-SA 4.0).*



*Figure 8: Women selling fish in a market in Arua. Source: Nancy Okwong (CC BY-SA 4.0).*

Due to a high influx of refugees, natural resources in Arua district have been severely stressed, including through causing deforestation in some areas. The refugee population extensively engages in the growth of tobacco to raise cash for survival, thus putting additional pressure on the land due to deforestation

and soil depletion. At the same time, certain echelons of host communities, such as landlords, businesses, and private service providers have profited from the presence of refugees. The most educated among the hosts are also benefitting from increased salaries and employment opportunities in the relief sector (Capici, 2021). Already in the 1990s, the presence of NGOs had permeated Arua, which:

“...affected every aspect of the local economy and society, from basic infrastructure, to the formal and informal economy of the town market. (...) The International agencies were also the biggest employers in the district, especially of the relatively educated, English-speaking people, and also wielded political power and patronage, visible in the UNHCR funded offices of the local government refugee officer” (Leopold, 2006: 39).

#### *Social perceptions: Refugee economies or refugees as economic burden?*

The presence of refugees has been perceived to negatively impact conditions in Arua. As one man, the brother of a former prominent rebel commander, put it: “[As refugees] they cultivated (...) crops, so when they come (...) [they] might come with a full lorry of relief food from his shamba. So when he reaches [Arua] he found that the price of commodities is booming, so he gets a lot of money. (...) Some of these people are now rich in the town here, building good houses and so on. You see, they start small businesses out of their food aid from the United Nations camp” (Leopold, 52).

Another elder explained the rebel activity of the West Nile Bank Front in terms of the refugee experiences as a contrast to the Amin days: “When Amin was in power, many of these people who are now suffering outside here, they had very high positions. They amassed a lot of wealth. (...) When they went into exile, they lost all those things. Maybe some of them would like to go back, to restore their past glory. It’s not possible now. Another problem is, during the time these people were in exile, there’s another generation now. Now there’s some youth that were born either there [in Sudan] or went when they were around seven, and when they came back later, they were already 17 years and couldn’t go to school. So there is a period when you have a generation that has not been to school and has been living freestyle life under the United Nations, just being fed all those years. And then you have the stories their fathers are telling them, how they used to enjoy and so on. No, that period has brought us a problem now. The youth we cannot control. That one is part of it, coupled with the low level of education (...) now [the rebels] have backing and training [from Sudan]. They can do recruitment, they can be armed” (Leopold, 53).

## A brief history of conflicts affecting the region



*Figure 9: Northern Uganda has a long and complex history of violence and tension. Image of soldiers from the Uganda People's Defence Force being trained by US military personnel. Source: Jesse B. Awalt, U.S. Navy (CC BY-SA 4.0).*

The situation for refugees in Uganda, and the situation in Northern Uganda (as well as across the border in South Sudan and DRC) has been fluid and changing for a number of decades, shifting between various stages of conflict and stability. With various peace agreements signed in the mid 2000s, today's situation is very different from a few years back, although the region's recent – as well as more distant – history will most certainly continue to impact the area and its people's development. Literature focusing specifically on refugees and more generally on the region therefore needs to be seen in light of this history. Literature from e.g. the 2000s discussing camp versus urban refugees does not necessarily reflect current challenges, but is helpful in understanding rather rapid developments over a shorter period of time. Similarly, literature from the 1990s and early 2000s reviewing conditions in Northern Uganda are focused on the conflicts of their time. They are therefore not directly reflective of today's situation, but serve as an important backdrop to better understanding the extremely difficult and complex makeup of the geography and its people. Literature on both refugees and the region are mainly in the form of reports, academic papers, and some journalistic pieces. It should be noted that journalistic work can be highly controlled in Uganda, and that reports and academic work are often coloured by the foci of policies at the time of research and writing. Issues like urban problematics and refugee agency (or emerging themes such as digitalisation) are not prioritised focus areas, although interesting observations are made by some authors. The headings below highlight major historical tendencies in the literature surrounding refugee issues in Uganda, and particular challenges in the Arua district and West Nile region.

## Marginalisation

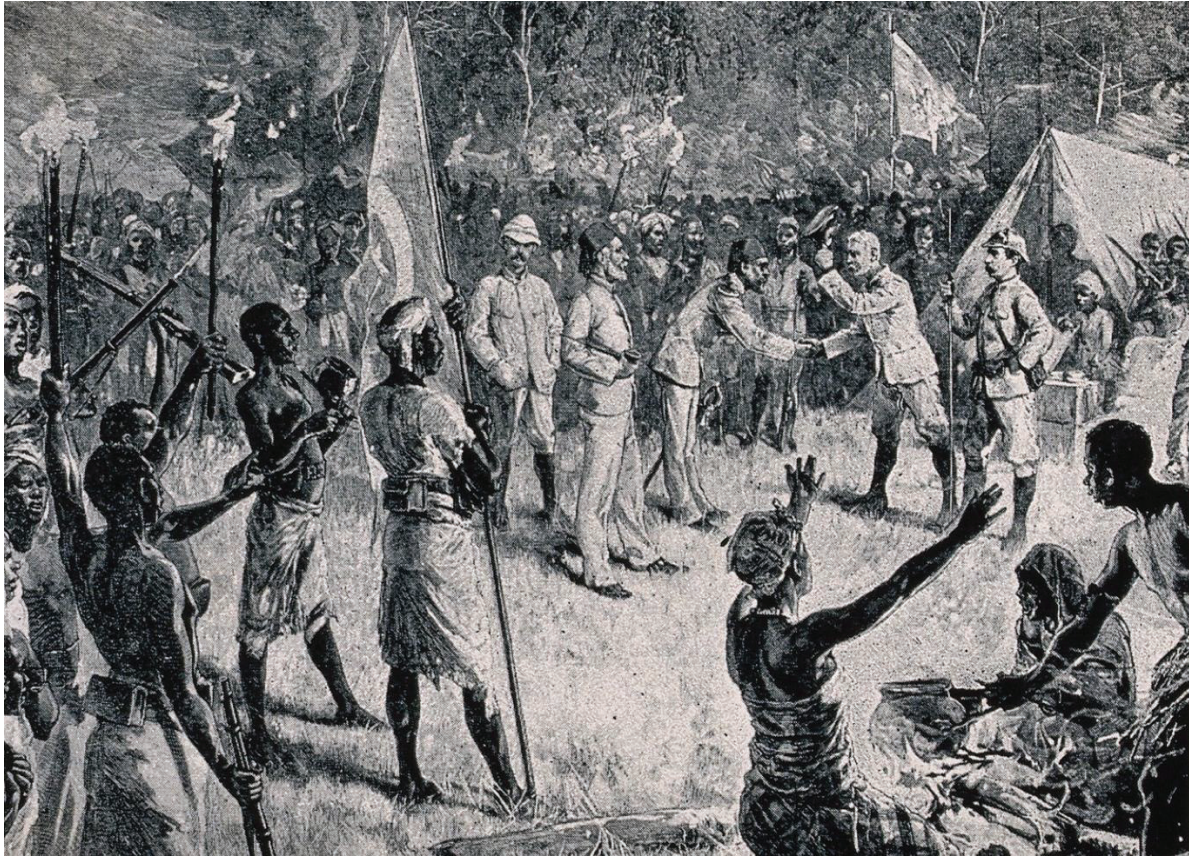


Figure 10: The West Nile region is home to the self-proclaimed Nubis, a group of soldiers of varied ethnic origins who were popular as soldiers in the British East African Rifles. Artist's rendition of the meeting between Stanley's expedition and Pasha's Nubi troops. The caption reads: Stanley's journey through unknown central Africa, 1887-1890: his meeting with Emin Pasha, April 29, 1888, at Kavalli, on Lake Albert Nyanza. Source: Wellcome Collection gallery (2018-03-30) (CC-BY-4.0).

The West Nile region have been the focal point of Eurocentric “Heart of Darkness” narratives, racialised portrayals of backwardness and savagery, and have often been at the receiving end of ethnic and socio-political tensions between Southern and Northern Uganda. Located in the north-western parts of Uganda, along the DRC and South Sudan borders, West Nile was considered a remote area until the 2000s. Its inaccessibility was periodically very real; a series of well-known armed conflicts have – save a few periods of relative calm – marred the region for decades; for a period of time, it was judicially declared off limits. Once known as the Lado Enclave, the area was briefly occupied by Belgium before being transferred to British rule. It was considered, perhaps more than other regions in this part of Africa, as a legitimate area for extraction: extraction of natural resources, but mostly for extraction of human resources. Says Leopold: “The people of the West Nile were little known to other Ugandans. (...) In the eyes of most Baganda they probably blurred into a northern Neolithic mass. Within the ethnically stratified economy created by the Ugandan version of British Indirect Rule, the West Nile district occupied a proletarian position - it had nothing to sell but its labour, and that was unskilled and poorly paid” (2006, 65). People of the region, as well as people that came to settle in the region such as the Nubi, were not only considered to be hardy workers, but were also thought of as exceptional fighters, and thus recruited by the British into the King's African Rifles (KAR). Originally a part of the Egyptian army fighting the Mahdi in Sudan, the Nubi came to settle in garrisons along the Nile, up to its source at Lake Albert. Intermarrying with local populations, the Nubi went on to spread across East Africa as soldiers for the KAR, fighting and settling in e.g. Kenya and Tanzania. The idea of the remoteness of West Nile thus

contrasts the cosmopolitan spread of some of its inhabitants. Outside renditions of the region as backward and stagnant are also in contrast to the dynamics of its peoples' settling, movements, and relocations over time. With numerous conflicts on either side of the Uganda/DRC/South Sudan borders, West Nile people have shifted locations and allegiances to best contend with current regional political upheavals. Although Arua is home to the Lugbara, the city and its surrounding areas are also home to local populations that have weathered conflict, returnee populations that at one point fled to DRC or Sudan, internally displaced populations from Arua's rural vicinity or conflicts elsewhere in the North, and refugees from DRC or South Sudan that are not settled in camps. While the current situation dictates that these refugees are by and large Sudanese, movements over generations mean that the socio-cultural makeup of Arua is multifaceted and cosmopolitan.

### *The regional backdrop*

The refugee crises in Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, DRC, and South Sudan are interlinked with internal political struggles, as well as the countries' relationship to one another. The conflicts that have arisen because of power struggles, ethnic differences, and economic gains have been ongoing since the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The liberation of South-Sudan (1983-2011) and the ensuing civil war (2013-2018) has complicated the situation and created yet another arena for rebel groups in several countries. Internal politics in these nation states are interwoven with one another; state leaders like Laurent Kabila, Paul Kagame, Yoweni Museweni, and Salva Kiir have supported one another's civil wars and have partaken actively in military operations in each other's countries.

An ever-changing number of militias and rebel groups operating in the region are prone to altering their aims and alliances, presently being driven just as much by economic gains as political or military advancements. The Eastern parts of DRC are vast, relatively uncontrolled, and with the promise of untapped natural resources. This has provided incentive for a range of rebel groups to establish a presence in the region. Poverty and inequality are root causes for protest and violence among people resentful and frustrated with unjust and unfair treatment. To this it is important to add European, American, and Soviet imperialism as a driver. The net effect has been refugee flows of an unprecedented scale and timeframe of over half a century. Refugees have flowed across borders and back again; borders that cut across ethnic lines and familial ties, adding yet another layer of complexity.

The countries in question have some common structural challenges of importance when trying to understand the historical roots and effects of their refugee crises: the countries' colonial liberation struggles have ended in dictatorships; ensuing liberation struggles (from the 1970s to present day) have resulted in civil wars and rebellions with regional support networks and violent collaborative efforts; ethnic differences have been underlying recent and current conflicts (the Rwandan genocide, the Lugbara/Nubi/Muslim groups of West Nile, the Dinka/Nuer conflict of South Sudan); nation state borders drawn across ethnic lines and the many tri-state border situations in the region have created complex situation and spatial "vacuums" of unrest, instability, and under-development where rebel groups operate and refugee situations more easily occur; large refugee settlements and camps have been established, adding to the strain on the areas; refugees also gravitate towards cities and towns but are not provided support as a result.

DeLuca and Verpoerten suggest that the social capital of local communities surge back some time after violent upheavals, and that the timing of research impacts the findings that communities in post-war situations are left vulnerable with long lasting repercussions. Bogner, on the other hand, suggests that long term communal scars are left to fester as justice is denied in peace settlements, by way of local conflicts remaining unresolved in the eyes of victims/local inhabitants.

## *Conflicts affecting Arua and West Nile in particular*

### *1. Power struggles in Uganda*

- Marginalisation and exploitation: West Nile region kept marginalised and exploited for manpower and resources during pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times. Narratives of backwardness and hostility arise between West Nile and “rest of world”.
- Infighting: Amin, originally from West Nile, overthrows Obote and rules 1971-1979. Obote regains power (1979-1986) and is overthrown by Museweni (1986 – present). Conflicts arise in West Nile due to support there for Amin. People in the region (mostly Lugbara) are accused of being hostile and warring (relating to Nubi history and narratives strengthened by Amin’s personal history).
- Flight/refugees: Amin’s army flees to then Zaire and Sudan from 1979-1990. Also non-combatants flee Obote’s (UNLA) and Museweni’s (NRA) retaliation efforts against the West Nile. Various rebel groups are established in the region in response, with documented atrocities against local populations carried out by all sides.
- Repatriation: By the 1980s many refugees returned to West Nile, despite ongoing fighting.
- Reconciliation: In the 1990s reconciliation processes had started with more local combatants and non-combatants returning. Under Museweni’s rule many rebels were provided amnesty.
- Marginalisation continued: West Nile continues to be a socio-politically and economically marginalised part of Uganda despite recent gains, e.g. Arua receiving city status in 2019.

### *2. Conflict and power struggles in neighbouring countries*

- The 1994 Rwandan genocide (Hutu atrocities against Tutsis)
- The 1972 Burundi genocide (Tutsi atrocities against Hutus) and Burundi Civil War (1993-2005)
- Civil war in DRC due to genocide and rebellion against national government(s). Warring factions supported by neighbouring countries.
- Eastern DRC becomes operational base for rebel groups. The unrest and instability that ensues result in major refugee flows from DRC, with e.g. Lugbara being both refugees and local populations on Ugandan side.
- The civil war in South Sudan is currently the conflict mostly affecting the refugee situation in Northern Uganda. Several rebel groups operate in South Sudan.

### *3. International and national refugee policies*

- The UN, Red Cross, Oxfam, and others have been present in the region since the 1970s, and have provided support and possibilities for refugees, while also providing grounds for conflicts between refugees and local populations.
- National policies in Uganda have been crucial to how refugees have been and are being supported. These policies have changed markedly from Obote to Museweni.

## *A West Nile predicament: Exploited region or benevolent host to (new) vulnerable groups?*

Being an area of extraction meant that the West Nile was not developed by the British or subsequent post-colonial regimes. Even with Idi Amin in power, who hailed from the area, the region was not particularly developed. Derogatory views and distrust of people from the region are said to connect to the rule of Amin, although the historical causalities are entrenched in a more structural exploitation of the area and mythical narratives devised to oppress its populations. These issues go back further. Today the area, despite being unjustly treated historically, and in addition to having been the foci of armed conflict, is host to the largest refugee settlements<sup>3</sup> in the country, putting added strain on its resources. The region has, as a result of both internal conflicts and of those in neighbouring countries, attracted

<sup>3</sup> Rhino, Impevi, Palorinya, Bidibidi, and Adjumani camps are the largest in Northern Uganda.

numerous international agencies, with the UN and NGOs being the biggest employers in the region. Should NGOs remove their presence from Arua town (as has happened on occasions of violence in e.g. the 1990s), the town and its residents would be severely affected.

## International and NGO support

### *GoU and International partners*

Refugee hosting is central to the development cooperation between the GoU and international partners. The GoU, international donors, and organisations have worked together to turn emergency response gradually into an opportunity to bring development to the West Nile and other regions. Using the Development Assistance for Refugee-Hosting Areas (DAR) approach, donor funding goes towards development opportunities for refugees and host communities. As a guiding principle, 30% of the humanitarian response funding in the settlement areas in Arua benefit the host community, including local infrastructure (UNHCR 2017).

Based on the UNHCR's Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS), refugees are given a plot of land to grow their food in settlement areas with the aim that they become self-reliant within four years. This approach may encourage refugees to stay in poor, politically marginal settlement areas close to the borders of their home countries but is unlikely to result in self-reliance (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2016; Development Pathways, 2018). Despite recognition that self-reliance has social as well as economic dimensions, much less attention has been paid to social or protection issues that may affect refugees' ability to be economically independent. This includes psychological and physical burdens that come with exile.

The international community in the West Nile region are increasingly engaging with refugees in Arua city, where they also respond to needs in poor host communities.

### *Oxfam's work in Uganda and Arua*

Oxfam has been working in Uganda since the 1960s, implementing both development and humanitarian programs across the country, with a recent focus on humanitarian preparedness, response and resilience strengthening, supporting resilient livelihoods and inclusive and accountable governance. Oxfam's humanitarian work has included Northern Uganda IDP response, South Sudan Refugee Response in West Nile and Northern Uganda, and Congolese Refugee Response in South West Uganda, where they have focused on increasing access to safe water and sanitation facilities in refugee settlements and host communities. In West Nile, Oxfam has had a presence in Arua since the 1990s, with a functional coordination office established in 2017 in Arua, and a satellite office in Imvepi. Since 2017 Oxfam has implemented emergency response projects in Imvepi, Bidibidi, Adjumani and Rhino (including Omugo extension), focusing on life-saving WASH, integrating protection and peacebuilding, and sustainable livelihoods. In Imvepi and Rhino/Omugo, Oxfam is currently WASH operating partner implementing 1) an Open Society Foundation Peace building and conflict sensitivity Project, 2) Danida-funded Livelihoods and Youth Skilling Project, 3) KfW Development Bank-funded Scaling up sustainable domestic water supply and sanitation service infrastructure projects and 4) livelihoods project.

### *Other NGOs, actors in Arua and Arua's network*

As part of Cities Alliance Global Programme on Cities and Migration, AVSI Foundation in partnership with Arua Municipal Council (AMC) and the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), has implemented the project "Strengthening Mechanisms for Receiving, Managing and Integrating Involuntary Migrants Within the Municipal Council" over the 2019-2021 period. The project focuses on the structural and institutional mechanisms for migrants, by enhancing availability and access to data, supporting platforms for dialogue

and capacity building, and promoting livelihoods through improved access to finances through financial institutions.

As part of this programme, Cities Alliance have supported local government with carrying out a city-wide census for Arua central district. This research bases its survey on the same geographic area to focus the data collection and to allow for comparability of the data. The census (2021) uncovers a number of issues significant to this research:

- 8,3% refugees are South Sudanese, 5.6% DRC.
- 82% of refugees have lived in Uganda before.
- Non-refugees live in houses they own, refugees live in rented houses.
- Most houses are permanent, and refugees and non-refugees are equally distributed by permanence of dwelling.
- Refugees have access to better WASH facilities than non-refugees.
- Refugees have better access to electricity in housing.
- Non-refugee household heads are often fathers, while refugee household heads tend to have no blood relation to household members.
- Non-refugees borrow more money than refugees. Non-refugees borrow to invest in business, refugees for food.
- 80% non-refugees are members of savings groups compared to 37% refugees.
- 83% non-refugees engaged in livelihood activities compared to 38% refugees.
- Business enterprise and employment income are most prevalent.
- Number of meals eaten per day equal among refugees and non-refugees, but 15% refugees receive support compared to 1% non-refugees.
- Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 seems equally distributed between refugees and non-refugees.
- Youth bulge bigger among refugees than non-refugees.
- Young heads of households seem equal among refugees and non-refugees.
- Literacy in youth population slightly higher among refugees than non-refugees (low 90% vs high 80%).
- Number of young refugees attending school higher than non-refugees.
- Young refugees from 18-30 have higher education levels than non-refugees 18-30.

## Use of social media and digital communication

Information on use of internet including social media and digital communication in Uganda is limited and is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. According to data provided on the website [Dataportal](#), 29,1% of the population in Uganda had access to internet at start of 2022 (up from 26.2% in 2021), and 2.8 million (5.9% of population) were on social media. Of social media use, almost 98% access via mobile phones. Facebook is the most popular of these social media platforms, with 2,5 million users (40% female, 60% male). LinkedIn is used by 1.7% of the population, Instagram 1.2%, Facebook messenger 1%, and Twitter 0,9%. Most online traffic is through mobile phones with 58% of the population having a mobile connection.

In 2018, the government introduced a tax known as an over-the-top tax (OTT) of 200 Ugandan Shillings (\$0,54 at the time) daily on the use of social media and digital communications platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and Skype (Altman-Lupu, 2018). The unsuccessful tax scheme was, according to the government, put in place for a number of reasons, including to reduce spread of gossip and falsehood over social media; to raise government revenue; to target foreign companies and foreign-designed products; to prevent people from circumventing existing taxes on the purchase of airtime; to tax luxury goods. However, it is likely that the imposed media tax was also introduced to

suppress political dissent (ibid). Many downloaded Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to get around the tax, while for others it made it harder to access these services. By 2019, the tax had led to a decline in internet users and social unrest while not meeting its revenue targets (only \$13.5 million of the \$77.8 million target was collected) and a new, less controversial tax 12% excise tax on bundles was introduced under the Excise Duty Amendment Bill in 2021 to replace the OTT (Kafeero, 2021; Kahunde, 2023). The current tax scheme is disproportionately impacting women due to existing structural inequalities in income and internet access between men and women in Uganda (Kahunde, 2023). In May 2023 the TRT Africa reported that the lawmakers retain the social media tax, although there is no mechanism for compliance (TRT, 2023).

Like other countries in the region, digital communication services like Facebook and WhatsApp are prone to be switched off. For example, during the Uganda election in 2021, social media and messaging platforms were restricted, and internet was shut down. Despite this, social media usage continues to grow. Bertrand, Natabaalo et al (2021) find that “the primary audience on WhatsApp remains young, urban people,” and that WhatsApp has become an important communication tool for politicians in reaching their constituencies during election times.

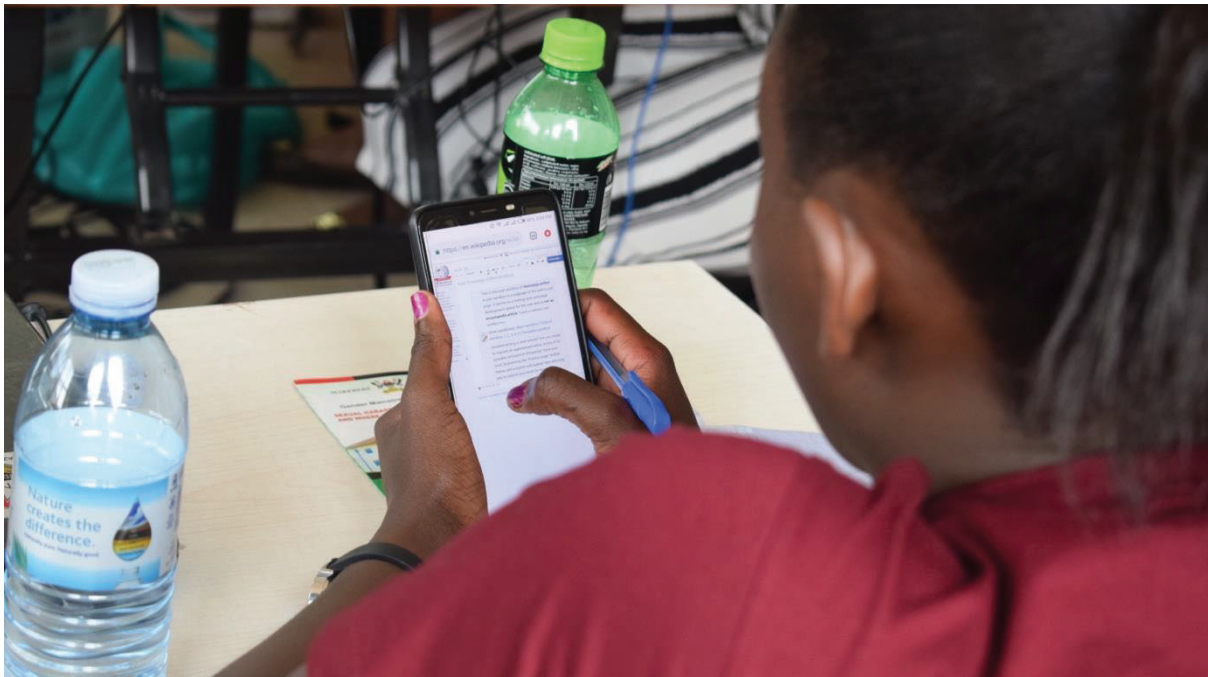


Figure 11: The use of social media and digital communication in Uganda is increasing rapidly. Source: Kateregga1 (CC BY-SA 4.0).

“WhatsApp’s use in the 2021 parliamentary elections in Uganda shows that it has become a ubiquitous part of the electoral campaign toolbox of parliamentary aspirants across Uganda. All candidates use it to some degree, even when running in predominantly rural constituencies where social media penetration is low” (Bertrand, Natabaalo et al, 2021).

## Methodology

This project specifically targets youth and seeks to understand their use of social media and its implications for access to work, services, and schooling through a series of qualitative and quantitative methods. There are varying definitions of which age brackets youth fit into. While UNICEF defines it as anyone between 15-24 years of age, The National Youth Policy in Uganda defines the group as those between 12-30 years. While the youth policy differs from the constitution in its definition, Okidi (2015) argues that the youth policy age brackets should be adopted in Uganda, in part due to its convergence with a variety of socio-cultural norms in Ugandan societies. Here the definitions of youth start anywhere from 12-16 years to around 30. Defining youth from the age of 12 also works well in terms of social media usage, where legal requirements dictate that many platforms be available to those 13+. Uganda has one the youngest population in the world, with around 74,5% of the country's total population being aged below 30 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016). There is a slightly higher share of youth in rural areas than urban areas overall, but with a higher share of people aged 20-29 in urban areas. In terms of social media use, statistics indicate that the upper tiers of this age bracket are the most avid users. In terms of work, Uganda has the highest youth unemployment rate in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ikumu, 2015, 120), although, as most people work in the informal sector, such statistics are not necessarily indicative of work activities among youth or lack thereof. Due to ethical requirements, this project has chosen to focus on respondents in the age bracket 16-30.

## Stages

In May 2022 Oxfam conducted a **limited survey** of 20 respondents for initial qualitative interviews. The candidates were meant to provide a cross section of young people (16-30) divided equally between nationals and refugees and balanced according to census data on gender and age groups. The respondents were chosen on the following basis:

### 10 Non-refugees

- 4 Male (1 that is 16-18, 3 that are 19-30)
- 6 Female (2 that are 16-18, 4 that are 19-30)

### 10 Refugees

- 5 Male (2 that are 16-18, 3 that are 19-30)
- 5 Female (2 that are 16-18, 3 that are 19-30)

Our initial 20 respondents for the qualitative interviews were possibly too geographically concentrated in the southern parts of the city. Representation from the more densely populated northern wards was missing. This may have affected our initial qualitative interviews, where we might have missed contextual challenges in the northern wards. Qualitative follow up interviews are based on these residents' views as well as the literature review.

In June 2022 **semi-structured qualitative interviews** were carried out with 12 respondents selected from the list of 20. These were chosen based on their feedback in the short survey, where their response to issues like use of social media, education, work, background, and gender provided grounds for varied and interesting qualitative interviews. The interviews were carried out using an interview guide focusing on issues related to social media use/social network, livelihoods/education, and housing/neighbourhood. One initial interview was carried out on Zoom by Ese (Urban-A) and Munduru (Oxfam) in English, with the remaining interviews carried out by Munduru face to face in a mix of English and Lugbara. All interviews were transcribed or summarised in English.

In August 2022 a **quantitative survey** was carried out by Oxfam staff among 194 respondents. The survey was based on the census area and data. Aiming for a 95% +/- 10% accuracy, Interviews were carried out among 90 refugees (46%), 53 (27%) migrants and 51 nationals (26%) between 16-30 years of age. This division is purposefully engineered to allow for a higher quantitative group of refugees. In actuality, according to the 2021 census, around 13% of the total population are refugees, 10% are migrants, and 77% hosts. Oxfam works primarily with refugees. With more refugees living in cities, Oxfam has expanded their focus from settlements to urban contexts. In Arua, Oxfam are dedicated to working with local urban poor as well as refugees. For Oxfam, and for this project, it is a comparison of refugee and host problematics that are most relevant. We have therefore adopted a 50/50 division between refugees and nationals in the survey to better highlight disparities and similarities between these groups. For other data analysis, hosts, migrants, and refugees are weighted according to the 2021 census data (number of hosts multiplied by 2.94, number of migrants multiplied by 0.44, and number of refugees multiplied by 0.22). This is done to mirror conditions in the age group of respondents where hosts make up 78% of the population, migrants 10%, and refugees 12%.

The survey questions were informed by the preliminary analysis of the qualitative interviews and generated as part of a joint effort between the three teams working in Uganda, India, and Lebanon. Six enumerators from Oxfam carried out the survey. Finding willing refugee respondents in each ward proved more difficult than reaching out to national respondents. This may have had to do with unwillingness among refugees to take part in surveys but is also the result of the low percentage of refugees living in each ward (on average 12%) vs. the survey's aim of surveying *equal* amounts of refugees and nationals.

In October 2022, Oxfam carried out 11 **qualitative interviews with key informants** working with youth in Arua in a variety of capacities: youth councillors, youth committee members, - chair persons, - speakers, and community development officers.

In December 2022 eight **qualitative follow interviews** were conducted with select respondents from the survey. The aim of these final interviews was to qualitatively engage with some of the questions and responses in the survey. Based on the survey, a series of calculations were made to see which factors amassed the largest groups of cohorts. As the clearest socio-economic distinctions in the survey were found between the three northern and three southern wards, interviews were first sought split between these geographies. The respondents were then divided into whether or not they intended to leave Arua, followed by their employment or student status. Based on these calculations, respondents were gathered from the following eight categories:

- Southern ward, stayer, unemployed, host
- Northern ward, leaver, unemployed, host
- Northern ward, leaver, student, "high" household income (above Ush 200 000)
- Southern ward, leaver, student, "high" household income (above Ush 200 000)
- Southern ward, stayer, self-employed, "high" household income (above Ush 200 000)
- Northern ward, leaver, self-employed, low household income (below Ush 100 000)
- Northern ward, uncertain about leaving, self-employed, mid household income (Ush 100 - 200 000)
- Northern ward, stayer, unemployed, low household income (below Ush 100 000)

Due to the ongoing Ebola outbreak in Uganda, and efforts to contain this, Oxfam minimised their face-to-face meetings in the field. The interviews were carried out via Zoom in English by Ese, with respondents physically present at Oxfam's offices in Arua. Kasumba (Oxfam) organised the interviews from Arua, while Oxfam staff were present as translators in one of the interviews. Due to poor weather conditions in Arua, and deadlines for the project, six of the eight interviews were conducted.

## Results

### Population

The quantitative survey includes 194 respondents between 16 and 35 years. The largest share of respondents lives in Tanganyika (33%), followed by Pangisa (27%), Kenya (16%), Awindiri (13%), Mwara (8%) and Bazar (3%), in line with census densities. Tanganyika is the ward with the highest share of residents who have lived there 5 years or less. Mwara is the only ward where no respondents have lived since birth. Kenya has the least newly arrived, and highest share of host community members.

According to the 2021 census between 11-13% of the population in the central wards in Arua are refugees, except for in Kenya and Bazaar wards with 5 and 4% refugee residents respectively (Fig 13). Arua can be seen as a destination city. In our survey, 75% of refugees and migrants having arrived more than 5 years ago. For migrants, less than 10% of migration is cross-border. Almost two thirds are seasonal migrants where the majority migrates to multiple cities depending on opportunities. In the qualitative interviews, no distinctions were made between hosts (who have lived their lives in Arua) and migrants (from within Uganda). Most migrants come from the rural hinterland surrounding Arua and speak Lugbara.

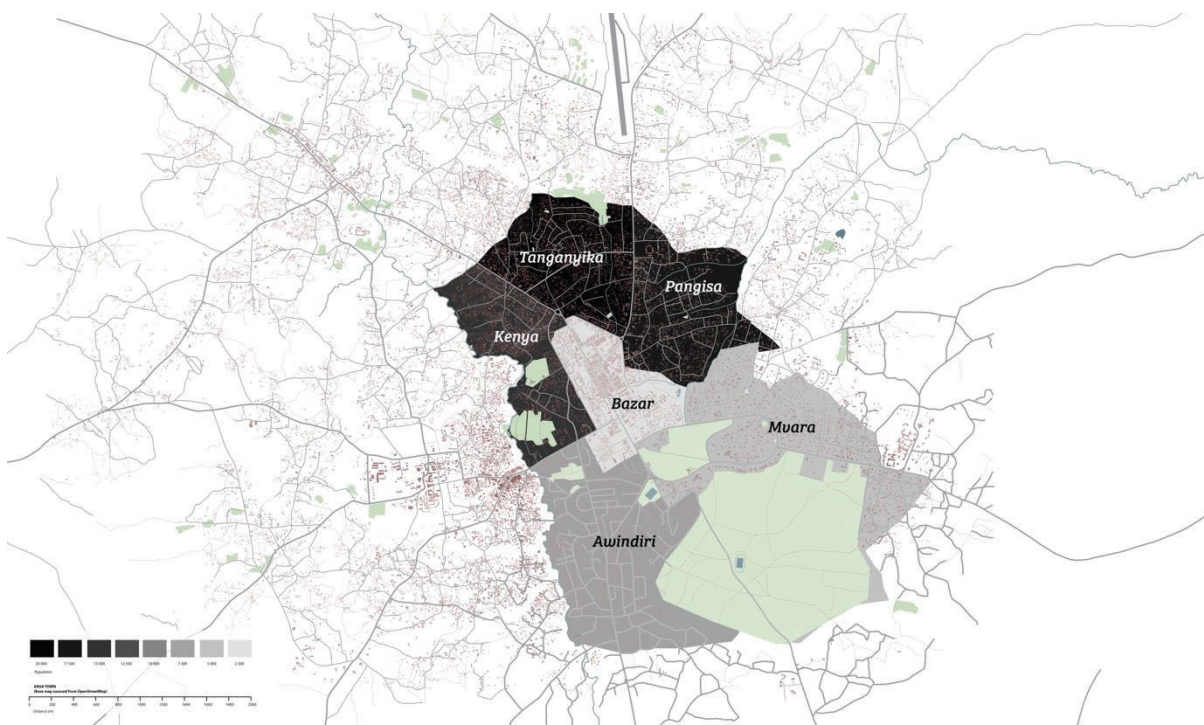


Figure 12: Map showing population densities in the surveyed wards (Authors 2023).

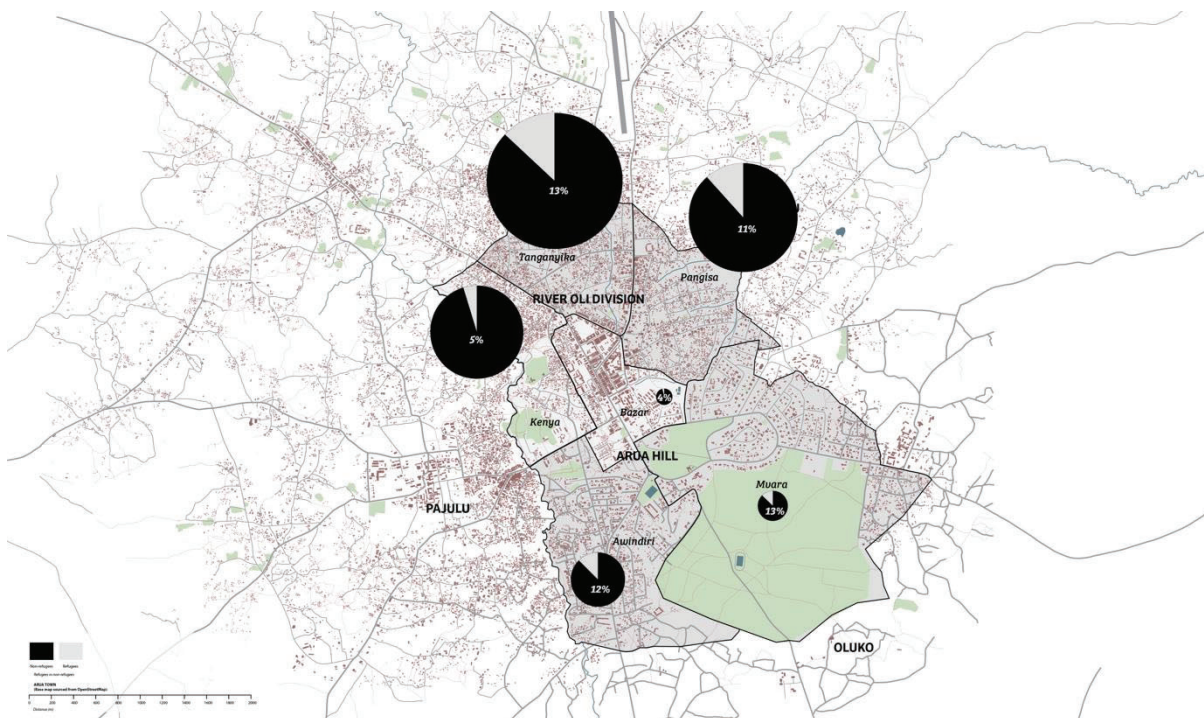


Figure 13: Map showing distribution of refugees in surveyed wards. Size of circles corresponds to population sizes in each ward (Illustration based on data from: AVSI Foundation, City of Arua, Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

## Ethnicity, religion, and language

More than 90% of host population and 60% of migrants identify as Lugbara, the main ethnicity in the region. In qualitative interviews, survey respondents do not highlight ethnicity as a major issue, although Ugandan nationals were preoccupied with whether or not other people were refugees. Language barriers were mentioned, but not only as a challenge related to nationality. Lugbara-speaking respondents point out that they stay out of Kampala-based social media networks where the language is predominantly Buganda. In contrast to resident respondents, key Informants mentioned ethnicity as contentious in local grievances between youth in Arua, in line with literature findings.

## Income

To some extent incomes (Fig. 14) mirror resident densities (Fig 12), with the highest proportion of low-income earners residing in Kenya ward, and the highest proportion of high-income earners in Awindiri ward. Our survey suggests that few high-income earners are refugees, although these do exist, and tend to stand out to the rest of the population. In interviews, host and migrant respondents mention that refugees tend to have better economic situations, allowing them to settle in better houses, and send their children to school. Some respondents point out that refugees who elect to come to the city are not as reliant on the assistance provided in camps, indicating their greater wherewithal compared to poor refugees who tend to stay in the camps. Some comments towards refugees were hostile, but just as many were about neighbourliness and friendships with refugees, especially if they had schooled together. If we compare the distribution of not only income, but also education among refugees, migrants, and hosts (Fig. 15), differences between refugees and hosts become clear, with a large low-income bracket among refugees, and lower low-income brackets among migrants and hosts. High income is here taken to

mean any income above US\$ 200 000, mid income between US\$100 -200 000, and low income below US\$ 100 000. Incomes are corrected for household size.

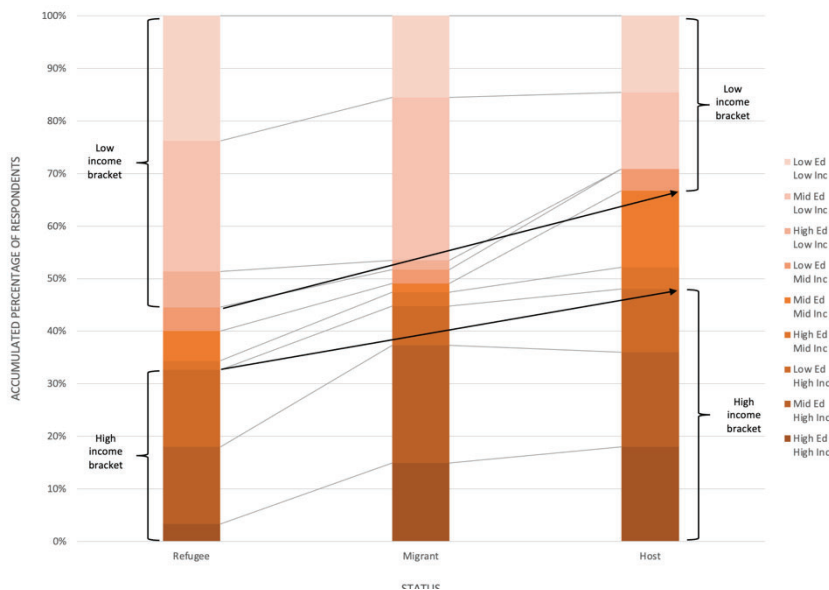


Figure 14: Comparison of refugees, migrants, and hosts' levels of education and income (Authors 2023).

The differences in Fig. 15 are only discernible when comparing the percentages within refugee groups against percentages within migrant and host groups. As refugees make up approximately 12% of Arua's population, the actual numbers of well-off refugees are rather small, and graphically indiscernible (Fig. 16).

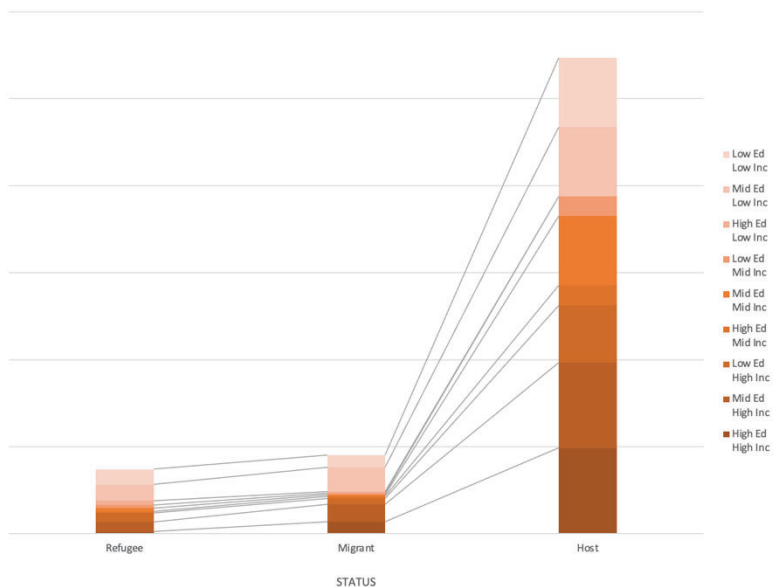


Figure 15: Actual distribution of income and education between refugees, migrants, and hosts (Authors 2023)

## Education

15% of respondents have higher education, while around one quarter have primary, lower secondary or secondary education respectively. 5% are illiterate or have no formal education (Fig. 17). Refugees are overrepresented in lower education (and among those without an education), while hosts are overrepresented in higher education compared to population averages for their age groups from census (Fig. 18). The data relates to the highest level of education the respondents had attained at the time of the survey, regardless of where they had received their education or whether they were currently in school. If we consider respondents currently in education (Fig. 19), the number of refugee respondents are higher in comparison to host and migrant respondents, with a majority of refugee schoolers currently attending lower education, and a majority of host schoolers attending higher education. In the qualitative interviews, host and migrant respondents were preoccupied with refugees being overrepresented in education.

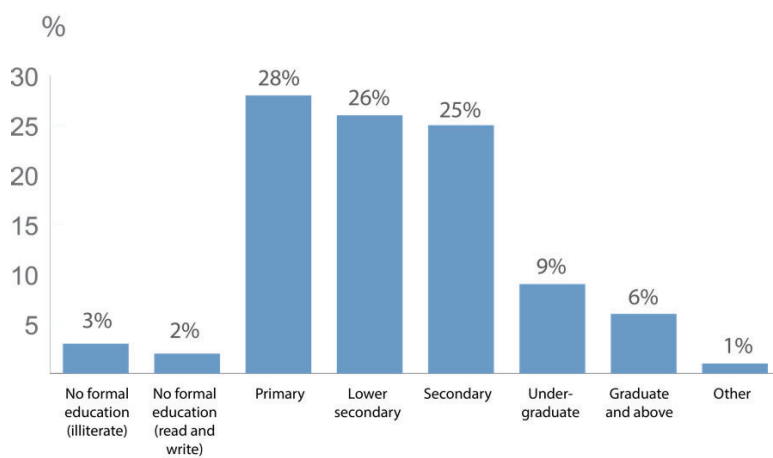


Figure 16: Levels of education among respondents (Authors 2023).

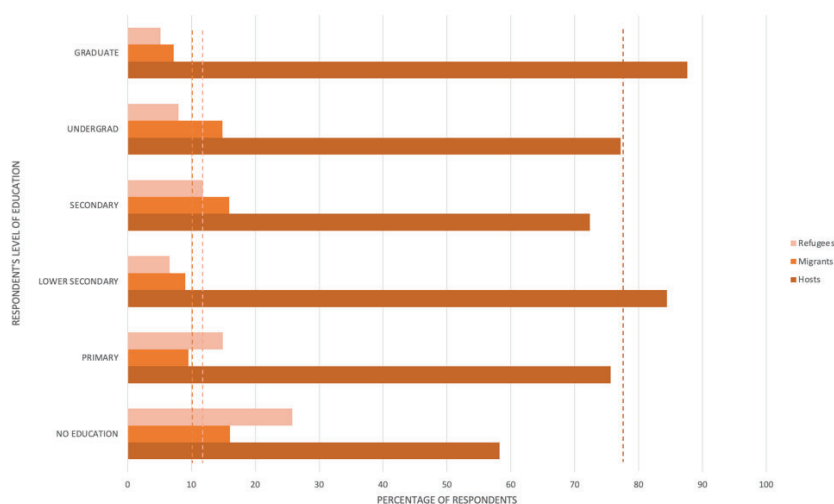


Figure 17: Host, migrant, and refugees' levels of education (Authors 2023).

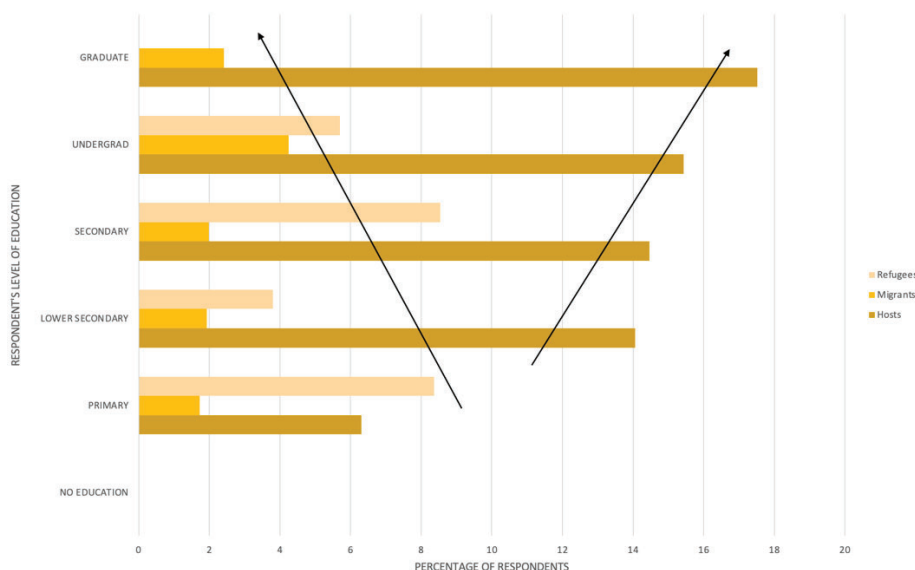


Figure 18: Percentage of hosts, migrants, and refugees currently in education (Authors 2023).

## Employment

Lack of education, skills, and information are consistently mentioned as the main barriers to work across wards. Lack of social network is also an important barrier. The qualitative interviews suggest that the size of such networks may not be as important as whom this network consists of. Several of the poorer respondents had social networks, but these seemed to consist of people in similar situations.

Unemployment in Uganda is high with 85% youth unemployment. In our survey, 35% are unemployed. Studies suggests that Ugandan's lack of awareness on right to work is a main cause of unemployment among refugees and migrants. Unemployment does not seem to vary with education level, indicative of a large informal sector where level of education is less relevant. Only migrants and hosts (4%) own their own business, with income below average. As a term like "unemployment" is difficult to define in an economy based on informal work, many of those who registered in the survey as "unemployed" provided information in the qualitative interviews that they were making a living through informal trade.

Around 70% of respondents believe that refugee status impacts work opportunities. Because of host and migrants' perceptions of refugees being better educated and having higher incomes, some hosts and migrants believed refugee status may *positively* affect work opportunities. Some Ugandan nationals also felt that refugees might have an advantage in applying for jobs with the many NGOs in Arua, given that refugee job seekers speak e.g. Arabic or Nuer and hold valuable experience having been refugees.

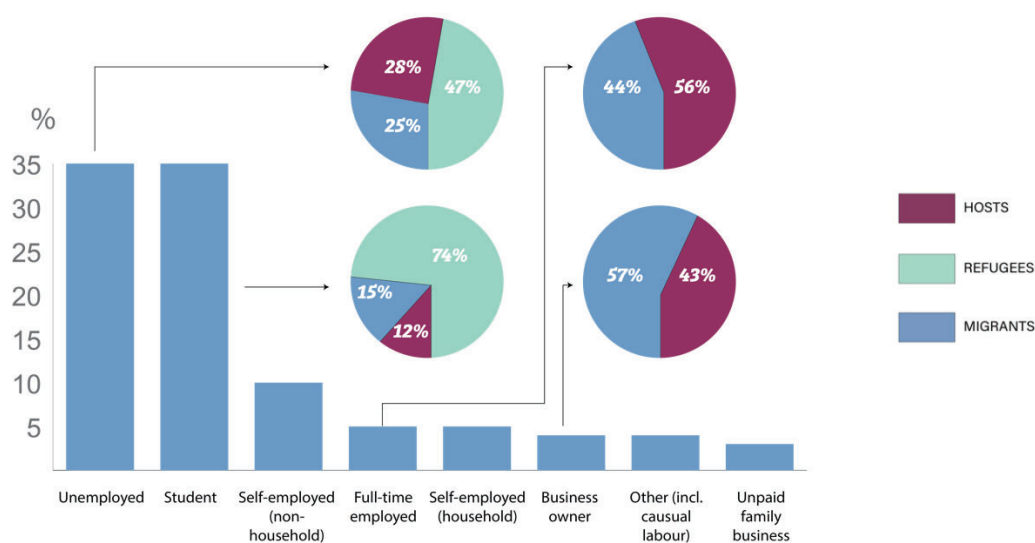


Figure 19: Employment status among respondents, including students (Authors 2023).

## Plans for the future

Many respondents intend to migrate to a new place or return home. Keeping in mind the 50/50 division between refugees and nationals in the survey, 68% of all respondents are planning to move on, or thinking about it.<sup>4</sup> Breaking this down, the majority of host respondents intend to stay, as do half of migrants. The intention to leave is not surprisingly highest among refugees (90%), but also students and unemployed regardless of refugee status (note that unemployment in this case does not necessarily equate to low household income). Among those intending to leave, a majority consider social media to be important for decision making, although the qualitative interviews suggest that “decision making” can range from using social media in attempts to acquire a job elsewhere, to a more prosaic use of social media to keep in touch with people when having left. The first semi-structured interviews revealed that if respondents were broken down into “leavers” and “stayers”, this corresponded in part with schoolers (“leavers”) and the self-employed (“stayers”), and partially transcended refugee – nationals divisions. This was investigated further in the survey and in the follow up interviews, showing that these groups’ respective use of social media was perhaps more disparate than that of refugees and nationals.

## Community and Belonging

The majority of survey respondents feel like they cannot rely on others in the community in times of stress and instability. More hosts and migrants than refugees say they rely on others, even though most refugees have stayed in their current location for years. A lesser but still significant share do not feel they are part of community and do not feel safe. In qualitative interviews clear distinctions were made between where respondents resided, with large neighbourhood differences also within wards. For instance, Tanganyika ward was considered by many to both have some of the nicest and worst neighbourhoods. Respondents living in what they considered to be nice neighbourhoods reported having good relations with neighbours, while some respondents living in what were considered poor neighbourhoods (e.g. Oli), did not trust their neighbours and lived in fear of being robbed or attacked.

<sup>4</sup> Correcting for census numbers, the stipulated percentage of Arua’s total population who are planning to move or might do so is 48%.

Literature shows that some refugees move back and forth between settlements and the city, allowing for them to receive support in the settlement, while maintaining livelihoods in urban areas. This was also mentioned by some respondents in interviews. Claims were also made that some refugee students lodged in Arua city with relatives or landlords, and headed “home” to their families in the settlement (e.g. Rhino) during the holidays.

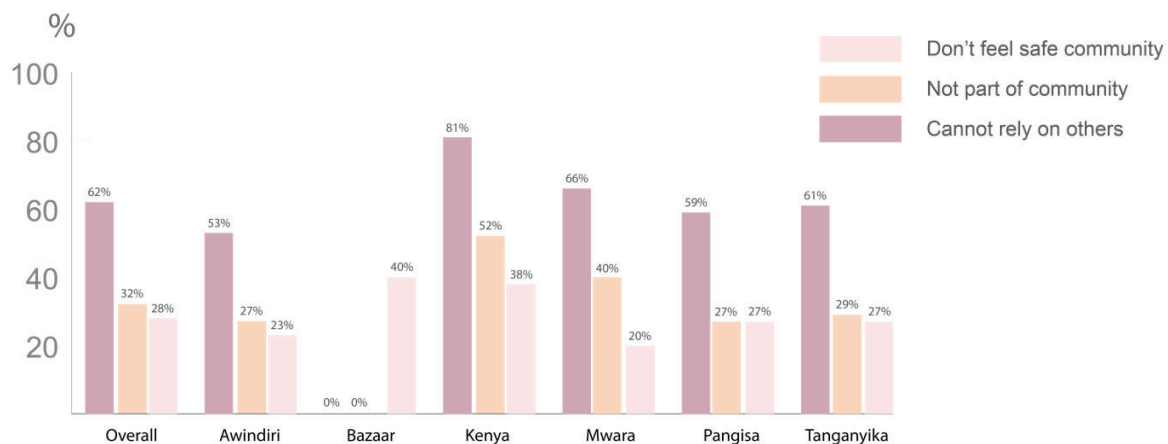


Figure 20: Belonging, safety, and social network in community across wards (Authors 2023).

## Social Media

Literature suggests that only 7% of the Ugandan population were social media users in 2021, with social media use reported to have grown by 36% between 2020 and 2021 (Kemp 2022). In the survey 83,5% of the respondents used social media. It is most widespread among refugees, and slightly less among host and migrants. The discrepancy between national figures and survey numbers can in part be ascribed to national figures taking into account the entire population, including the elderly and rural populations, while the survey in this project focuses on urban youth.

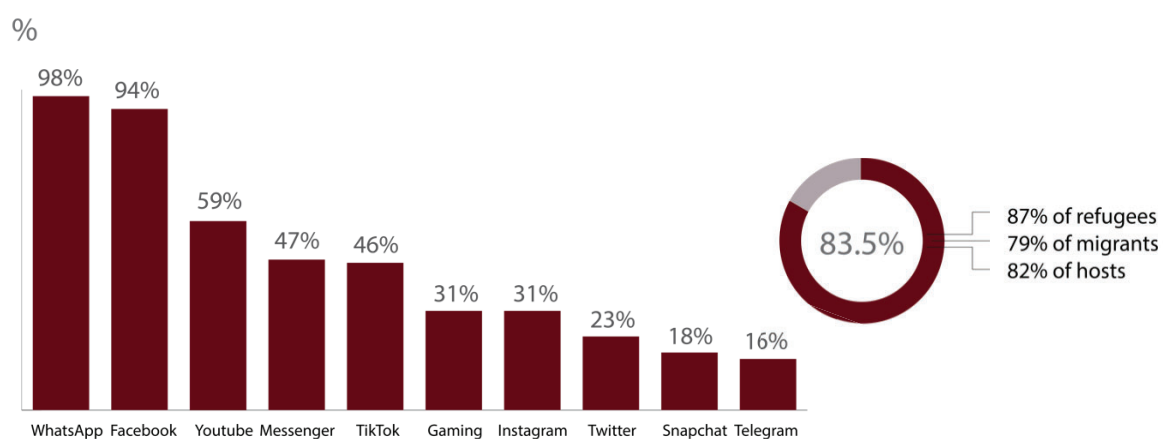


Figure 21: Use of social media platforms among respondents (Authors 2023).

Social media was mostly used for communicating with friends, entertainment, news, finding new friends. Social media was less used – but was still important for – information on access to services, housing, livelihoods, communicate with network where they live, and to access information from local and national authorities. In interviews respondents reported that posts in other Ugandan languages than

Lugbara was a barrier. Virtually all respondents on social media used WhatsApp and Facebook. But YouTube, and platforms such as Twitter, Messenger, TikTok, and Instagram were also important. Gaming was also quite common.

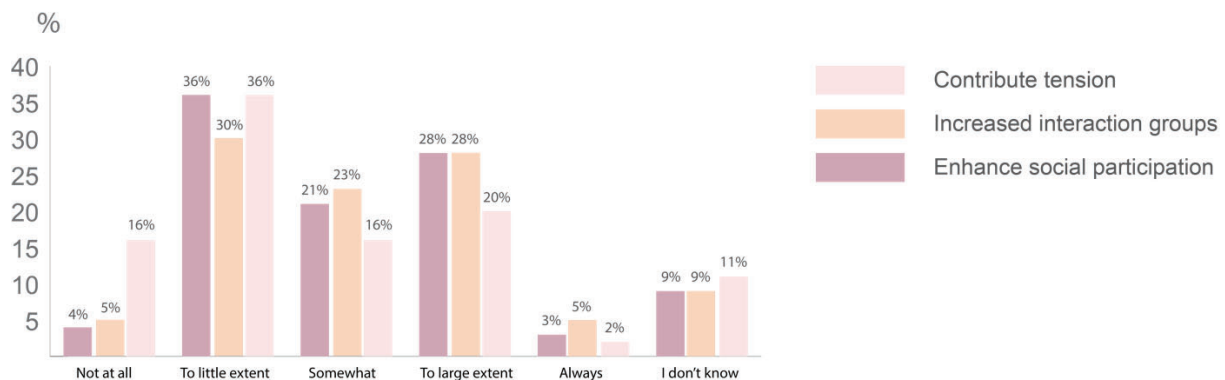


Figure 22: Social media's impact on interaction, participation, and tension in the community (Authors 2023).

Approximately half of the respondents using social media were active every day. Almost all respondents share information from social media with other household members or friends and receive information from others who have found it on social media. In interviews, the respondents' networks of friends seemed the most important for conveying of job ads or work opportunities, although this was not a common occurrence. At the same time, trust in information was low. This is true overall and particularly among refugees. Most did not believe there were restrictions on use of social media from outside parties, such as government, but one in five still thought this "to a large extent" was the case. In addition, 80% sometimes chose not to post on social media due to potential consequences, including social acceptance, acceptance by family members etc. In interviews some respondents reported staying out of politics on social media. One (host) respondent indicated that getting involved in politics "can get you killed".

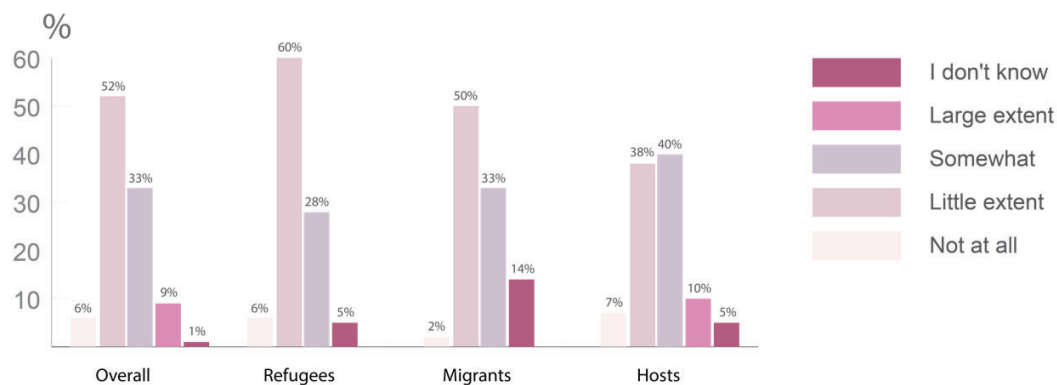


Figure 23: Degree of trust of social media content among respondents (Authors 2023).

## Social media in relation to income and education

Both survey data and qualitative interviews suggest that there are correlations between income, education, and use of social media. Fig. 25 shows positive responses regarding the use of social media on a variety of topics, structured in relation to respondents' education and household income. While the rate of positive responses varies from topic to topic, the scattering of points per socio-economic group is relatively concentrated for some groups, indicating that there is a degree of similar behaviour and attitudes towards the use of social media within each socio-economic group.

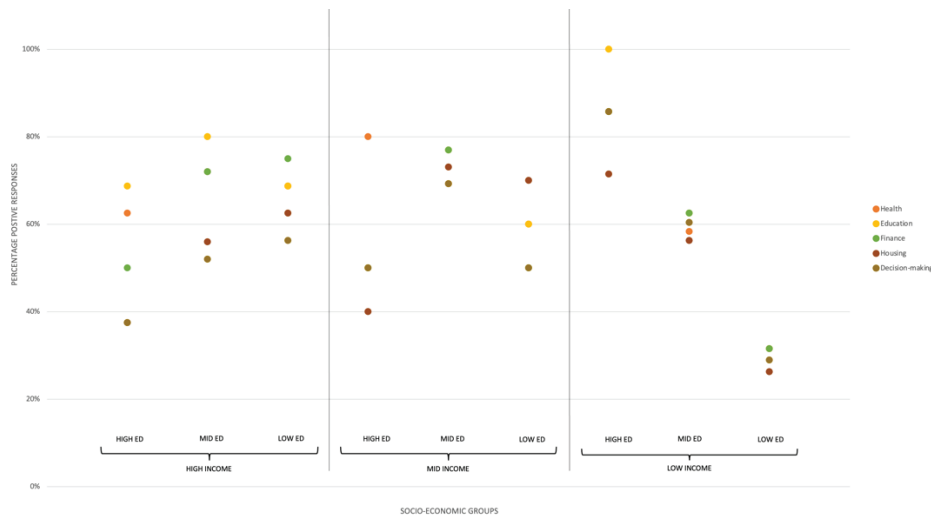


Figure 24: Use of social media in relation to income and education (Authors 2023).

Higher incomes seem to positively impact use of social media to a greater degree than education, but there are also positive correlations between use of social media and higher education. Fig. 26 is a collection of positive responses with regards to several uses of social media, or how respondents perceive of social media. The responses in the graphs relate to: tension in social media channels, participation in social media channels, interaction with refugees through social media channels, whether there is a sense of community on social media, whether they use social media to collect information from organisations, whether they provide feedback via social media, and whether they trust social media. Analysis of responses are, as in previous graphs, structured according to income and education. Responses vary greatly, but high income/high education respondents always respond most positively to questions, while low income/low education respondents always respond least positively. Note that “positive” in this context differs: for questions relating to tension in social media, positive responses mean that respondents believe there is a high degree of tension, while a positive response to sense of community means that respondents feel there is a clear sense of community. In other words, positive responders feel strongly about both negative and positive aspects of social media. Comparing these responses to the qualitative interviews, there seems to be a correlation between positive responses among high income/high education respondents and levels of social media use: those with a greater wherewithal could afford to be on social media more often, and had greater exposure than low income groups. In the qualitative interviews education typically determined the social media groups the respondent belonged to, the content he or she was exposed to, and levels of engagement. If the responses are amassed, a clearer tendency emerges (Fig 27). The average positive responses for each income group; high income (above Ush 200 000), mid income (Ush 100 - 200 000), and low income (below Ush 100 000), steadily decrease with income. If the same exercise is carried out focusing on education (Fig. 28); higher education respondents, middle education respondents, and lower education respondents, the tendency is not so clear, indicating that income might be more influential for social media use and exposure than education.



Figure 25: Positive responses to use of social media across socio-economic groups (education and income) (Authors 2023).

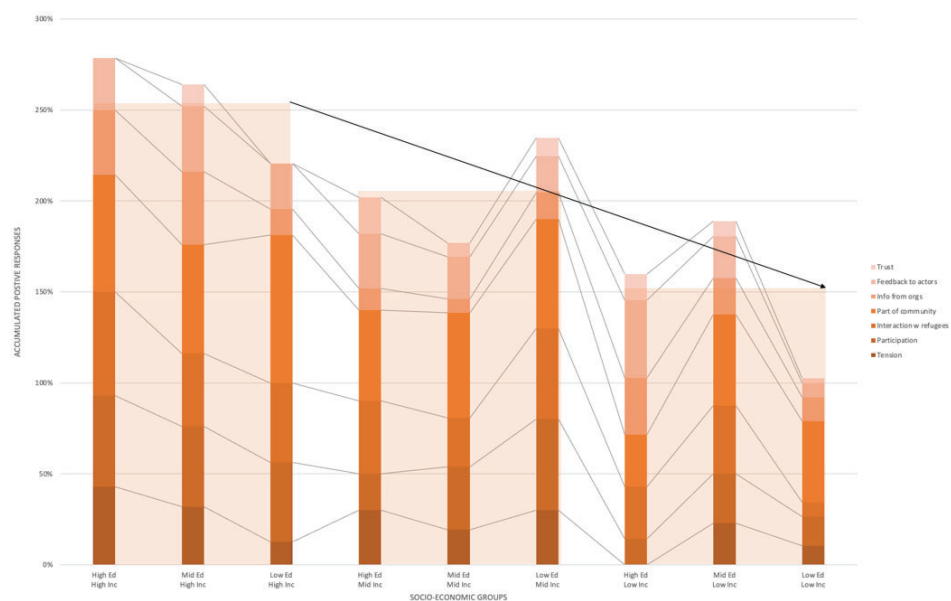


Figure 26: Accumulated positive responses to use of social media across topics distributed by income groups (Authors 2023).

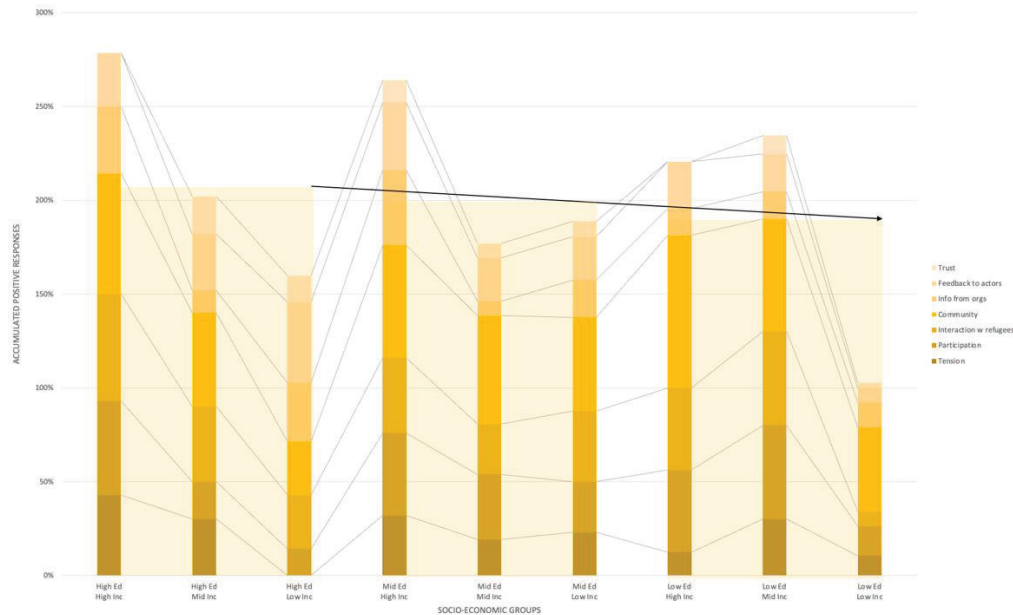


Figure 27: Accumulated positive responses to use of social media across topics distributed by education groups (Authors 2023).

## Further visualisation of survey data

The below illustration is a visualisation of data from the survey. This has in turn generated the respondent categories for the follow-up interviews. The visual investigations provide the following insights:

- There are clear differences in income between northern and southern wards.
- Outliers make up a substantial part of household incomes in groups (i.e. 6 of 194 respondents make decidedly more than others, to the point where they skew statistics).
- There are more respondents who “want” to stay in northern wards and more who want to leave in southern wards.
- Among leavers in northern wards, the unemployed are overrepresented.
- Among leavers in southern wards, students are overrepresented.
- In general, hosts are overrepresented among stayers, and refugees and migrants overrepresented among leavers.
- If outliers are included, households of unemployed respondents make more money than other groups.
- The ability to save seems to be high in general, possibly with a tendency that those wanting to leave are better equipped to save than those that stay.
- Stayers (and uncertain) in northern wards have the lowest on average household incomes, while leavers’ households in southern wards tend to – on average – make the most money.
- Leavers’ households in southern wards make more money in total than uncertain and stayers.
- Percentage-wise the self-employed are more represented among those that want to stay (and more so among the uncertain).

## INCOMES, WARDS, STAYERS, AND LEAVERS

- Those living in northern wards (More densely populated, on avg. lower incomes)
- Those living in southern wards (Less densely populated, on avg. higher incomes)
- Those intending to stay in Arua
- Those intending to leave Arua
- Those unsure if they will leave Arua
- Slice of pie = Percentage of population
- Radius of pie = average monthly income (household)

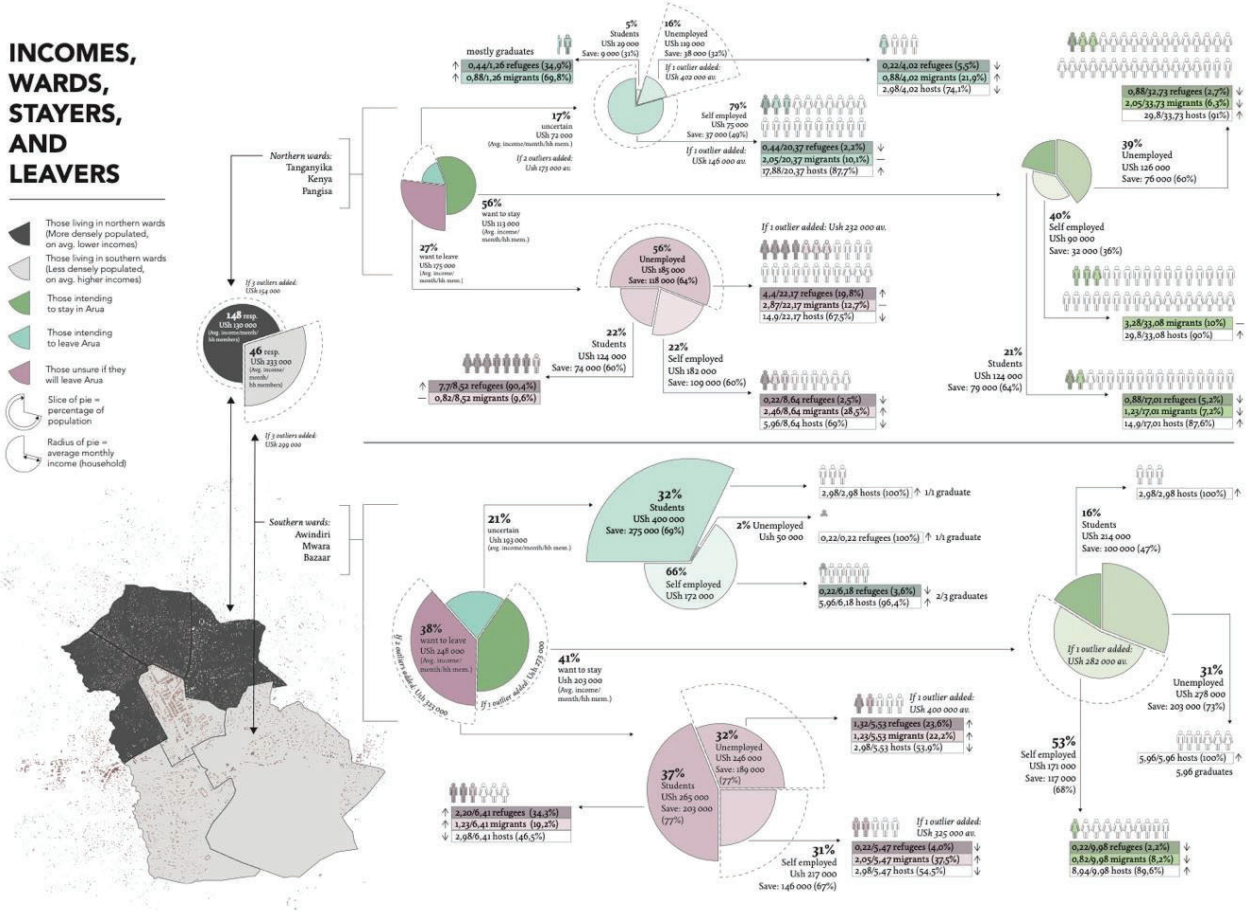


Figure 28: Survey data analysed and corrected according to census data (between refugees, migrants, and hosts).

## Discussion

While the statistical material shows that Arua is a destination city, many of those who live in Arua intend to, or have hopes of, leaving the city at some point. The qualitative material suggests that people's ability to realise such intents varies greatly, especially between poor hosts who live in the hopes of a better future, and a smaller number of more well-off refugees with clearly defined future trajectories. The map below visualises flows of refugees, migrants, and hosts to and from Arua based on the survey. It shows how **Arua is both a destination city and a stopover city**. The map also shows that hosts and migrants are overlapping definitions, with many hosts having been born in Kampala, but defining themselves in the survey as Arua based hosts. A large portion of people who define themselves as migrants originate from Arua's immediate rural surroundings. In interviews there were few people who made distinctions between hosts and migrants, while clear distinctions were made between Ugandan nationals and (South Sudanese) refugees.

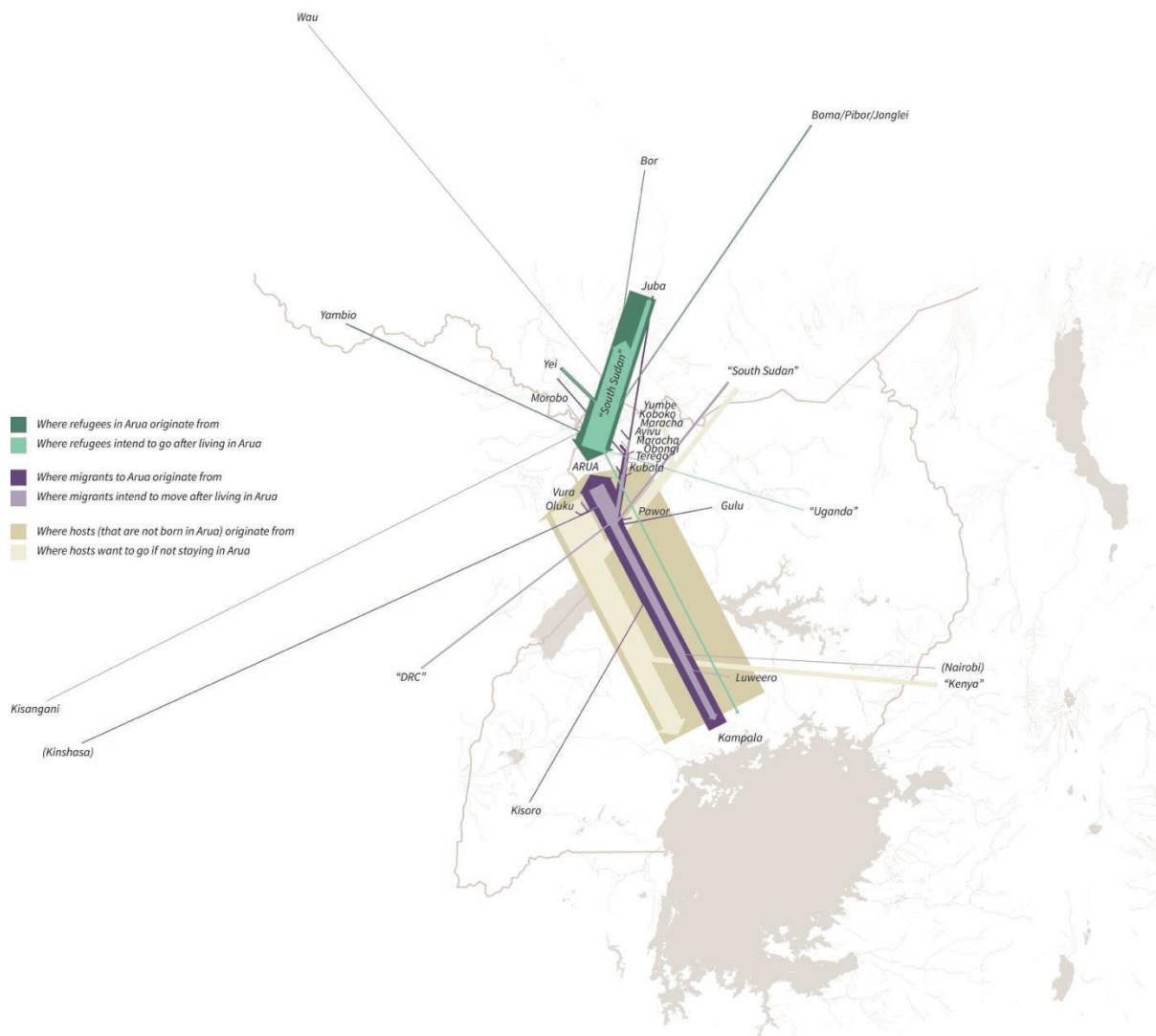


Figure 29: Map of Uganda and neighbouring countries showing where its current population comes from, and where they intend to move.

## Stigmatisation of refugees

**There is a tendency of stigmatisation of refugees; they are perceived as being better off than the host community.** The perception is partially noticeable in both in the 2021 census and our survey. Statistically, refugee households that have a higher overall income, is small. This suggest that some refugees (and migrants) are comparably better off than the host community. Of respondents, 15% have higher education, while around one quarter have primary, lower secondary or secondary education respectively, and 5% are illiterate or have no formal education. In general, refugees have lower education attainment. But in local perceptions, attention is given to *who* is in school, rather than which *level* they are at. While the statistical material points to a higher than average percentage of refugees among primary level schoolers, and a higher than percentage of nationals among higher education schoolers, local attention focuses on the fact that 3 out of 4 schoolers are refugees. In part, this speaks to income levels, as refugee families have the ability to invest in education – or have the economic opportunity of prioritising it. This is corroborated by the survey where students in general belong to households with high incomes. However, given that most refugee schoolers are going through primary and secondary education, refugee families with youth in school can also be said to be prioritising catching up on necessary education.

In the survey, around 70% of respondents believed that refugee status impacts work opportunities. We did not pick up on any statistical indication that refugees have better jobs, although interviewed respondents suggest that refugees work for “large companies” and “organisations”. We did not pick up on refugees not getting jobs because of their background either. What can be pointed out is that given the project’s focus on youth, many of our respondents who are clustered in the “unemployed” (35%) or “student” (35%) categories belong to households where others might be breadwinners. The qualitative interviews suggest this to be an explanation as to why many “unemployed” belong to households with relatively high incomes.<sup>5</sup>

## Refugees a disparate group

Preliminary qualitative findings correlated to the quantitative data show that there are disparities between refugees. This suggests that **refugees cannot be considered being a singular group**, and that while some have very little, others have the capacity to not only generate comparatively substantial incomes but are also better educated and socially mobile. The qualitative data suggests that **national status is not necessarily all-defining. Class, economic, or social standing and mobility also factor in, transcending national or ethnic identities**. Within Arua, class belonging is partially defined by which ward you reside in. The better educated and socially mobile are therefore best seen as a mix of nationals and refugees.

While we do not have a statistical basis for this, interviews with respondents as well as census organisers suggest that refugees who seek urban destinations are on average better off than refugees who tend to stay in settlements. The statistics on assets for South Sudanese refugees in Arua would therefore not be the same as statistics on assets for refugees from South Sudan as a whole. But it is worth noting that there are outliers that push these statistics, e.g. income, in an upward direction.

Few refugees in Arua have high incomes and bountiful resources. The 2021 census and the survey for this project is limited to six wards in Arua city centre. While this captures clear socio-economic differences, the census leaves out relatively populated areas, especially to the west of the centre. Census organisers indicate that an inclusion of these areas might have generated different census data. Current census findings indicate – much like the survey – that refugees on average score slightly better than nationals on many indicators such as education<sup>6</sup>, income, and housing. Had areas to the west been included, census organisers speculate that more vulnerable segments of the refugee population would have been uncovered. Nonetheless, identifying groups of refugees with seemingly higher resilience and capacities in the city centre, is an interesting and valuable finding.

## Behind refugee-host divisions: class, poverty, and location

The statistical material differentiates between refugees, hosts, and migrants. Stigmas relating to refugees were brought up by host respondents, and KIs believe ethnicity to factor into differences between youth in Arua. Still, **all the interviews point to underlying issues of poverty, wherewithal, education, and the neighbourhoods people live in, as the actual basis for this differentiation**. Refugee and host identifiers

<sup>5</sup> Statistically speaking, if higher income refugee and host households are compared (making more than 100 000 Ush/month/household member), refugee households are overrepresented among households that send youth to school (20% compared to normal 10%), while host households are slightly overrepresented in households that do not send youth to school, i.e. are registered in the survey as unemployed (85% compared to normal 80%). Interviews indicate that some unemployed respondents, while living in households with relatively high incomes, do not have access to family funds, or do not have any say in household expenditures. They wish to go to school, and the household economy suggests that this could be possible. Still, this is not prioritised. The survey thus provides a false impression that unemployed respondents are better off, when in actuality they may be cut off from financial support and have no immediate means of attaining an education.

<sup>6</sup> As noted above, this relates to being in education, and not level of education attainment, which is lower for refugees than hosts.

correlate to a certain extent with such class distinctions, although not entirely. Respondents in the qualitative interviews were only interested in “pointing fingers” at refugees for their perceived resources, and perceived access to services, education, jobs, or opportunities. Refugees, it was said, brought up rents and food prices, and they sent their children to the best schools. But statistically speaking, poverty is prevalent among both refugees and host groups, and similarly, those with resources are also represented among hosts as well as refugees. When pressured on the topic, many respondents admitted to being mostly worried about becoming victims of crime, admonishing “bad people” for their unlawful and immoral ways. Respondents connected this kind of behaviour to lack of opportunity, lack of education, or neighbourhood, and not refugee status, citizenship, or ethnicity.

**Instead of making distinctions between refugees and hosts, it may be more helpful to work with distinctions connected to resources.** Our respondents, both in the survey and in the interviews, vary between the very poor and those with plenty of resources. **The poor are chiefly school dropouts who make a living informally through e.g. vending.** They live in the poorer neighbourhoods in Arua and have a local network consisting of people in similar situations. **While they use social media and digital communication on a daily basis,** and many say it is important in their daily communication with peers, **it is restricted by the price of data, fear of theft, and the local proximity of their social network.** **Those with resources** – or access to resources through family members – are often in school, and have a network that often stretches outside of Arua. **They have easier access to social media and digital communication as data is of less economic concern, theft is not as prevalent, and their social network, often international, extends their use of social media.** This group too, claims social media is important to their daily communication with peers. But how important is social media to these groups ability to get jobs, or access livelihoods or schooling opportunities?

## Connections between socio-economic situations and use of social media

From this research project we know quite a bit about people living in Arua, distinctions between refugees, migrants and hosts, and access to education and work. We also know quite a bit about their social media and digital communication habits. It is, however, difficult to know exactly how social media use affects e.g. access to work, school, or opportunities, as many and varied factors come into play, affecting one another. As the data material points to income and education as major dividing factors between youth in Arua, we can make distinctions between three types of social media and digital communication users: the poor, the mid-income earners, and the high-income household earners. In doing so, we find that expectations and experiences with social media differ. **The poor can be said to have the greatest expectations but the least experience with social media;** they believe it to hold solutions for them that will get them out of their current situation. This belief seems mostly based on hopes and ideas of what social media is and does in terms of expansive networks, and less on experience with such as their actual networks seem to be limited. The second group, **mid-income earners, have some experience with social media, but as a result have less expectations of it being a panacea;** several have tried to get jobs or opportunities through social media, often through personal networks, but few if any have been successful. They will continue chasing opportunities through social media, as much as they seek opportunities through other channels. The third group, the **high-income earners, are perhaps those with most experience with social media.** As this group is already well connected, with better chances of reaching goals, and in many cases pre-defined trajectories for school and careers, social media is not so much a channel for life or livelihoods opportunities as it is a social channel. But as social media is more of a “given” to this group, it is perhaps more difficult to ascertain to what degree social media plays an instrumental part in their decision making connected to futures and opportunities. The respondents in this category might be unable to discern between what they consider social interaction (with regional and international peers, family, and contacts), and what creates life opportunities for them at a later stage.

**In order to ascertain with more confidence how these three groups are affected by their social media and digital communication use, a longitudinal approach to the research would be valuable**, allowing us to follow groups over time to see if their plans and hopes for the future come to fruition, and how they navigate those futures with or without social media.

## Three different ways of thinking about social media

With poverty, income, education, and neighbourhood clearly affecting differences between respondents, these also affect the ways in which respondents use social media. Based on the statistical and qualitative material it can be useful to think of the use of social media in three different ways:

### Quantity

Many respondents point out that their incomes affect the amount of data they can purchase. There is in other words a direct correlation between poverty and degree of exposure to social media. The less money you make, the less time you get to spend on social media. Those who can afford data thus have more experience using social media.

### Quality

According to the statistical material, respondents' levels of education affect the number of positive responses to social media use: there is a tendency that the higher the education, the more positive responses. Leaning on the qualitative material, this is not only indicative of greater exposure to social media among those with greater wherewithal, but also of the type of social media interaction those with higher education have compared to those with less or lower education. There is evidence to suggest that education affects which groups one takes part in, how realistic one's expectations are to what social media can provide, and ability or interest in analysis of social media content and interactions.

### Network

Beyond income and education affecting both quantity and quality of social media use and exposure, social media networks were often brought up in interviews, and were considered important: social media networks were both a means and an end. Respondents were interested in gaining larger networks outside of their usual social circles for the sake of taking part in different social media conversations and being exposed to new material. But social media was also a way to expand on digital social networks that might translate into "real life" future opportunities: training, jobs, migration. Refugees keeping in touch with relatives and connections in South Sudan via social media, thus represented a group with geographically extended networks. Refugees with higher education and greater wherewithal were particularly "well networked". Host respondents indicated their desire to be a part of these networks, pointing out how school was one such arena for a) expanding "real life" networks to include refugees in school, then b) being included in such refugees' social media networks, in order to c) potentially utilise these newfound social media networks to get better jobs, training, or simply move elsewhere.

## Schoolers/Leavers vs. Self-employed/Stayers

A large share of Arua's young population say that they want to leave Arua at some point. Given their age, this is perhaps not surprising. The wish to leave cuts across national identities and socio-economic divides, but nationality and wherewithal, in addition to education, factor into respondents' abilities to make real their plans for leaving. In the qualitative interviews, many of those who had signalled in the survey that they would *not* leave, said they would consider leaving should the right opportunity (e.g. work) present itself elsewhere. Those with less resources and wherewithal considered the likelihood of finding opportunities elsewhere small ("There is no opportunity out there yet"). Those with more

resources considered the likelihood to be much higher (“I am quite sure I’ll get the scholarship”). **A reasonable hypothesis is therefore that – regardless of national or refugee status – the vulnerable stay in Arua, and those with various forms of capital/assets tend to think of Arua as a “stopping station”, among others for education, before moving on.** It should be added that they *plan* to do so. For some refugees it might not be feasible to go back to South Sudan.<sup>7</sup> Even so, a plan of leaving might mean one wouldn’t invest too heavily in one’s future in Arua. A potential problem is therefore a form of “brain drain” from Arua. Many want to leave in search of opportunity elsewhere, and it is those with better resources, better schooling, larger networks, and better wherewithal that have the most worked out plans for leaving and are perhaps most likely to succeed in their plans. It should be mentioned that many would also want to return to Arua at one point. “I want to go back to South Sudan. I want to help build my country,” said one refugee respondent, and added: “But I’ll also return to Arua. This is where my family and friends are.”

## A reversed hypothesis

For analytical purposes we might break down respondents in this research into **two broad categories** (with some overlaps and middle ground): **Schoolers/leavers with resources** on the one hand, and **stayers/self-employed with fewer resources** on the other. Both groups utilise social media, but schoolers/leavers have a larger (international) network that influences the potentials of their social media use. Stayers/self-employed have limited access to social media for economic reasons, and their social media network also tends to be more local, consisting of other people in similar situations. While one research question for this project has been whether refugee groups suffer adversely from not having “local” social media streams, as this may put them at a disadvantage in searching for work, housing and services in cities like Arua, what we are finding is an almost reversed hypothesis, equally challenging: As many young people are seeking opportunity outside of Arua, **it is those that are most vulnerable, i.e. stayers/self-employed (of which hosts are most prevalent percentage-wise) that are at a disadvantage.** Many stayers *hope* to leave Arua at some point. In seeking opportunities outside of Arua they look at social media as an important tool but seem to be cut off from any social media networks that allow for this tool to be effective. In the opposite end, **many of the refugees that make their way to Arua are over-represented among respondents with resources (e.g. social, economic). They are well networked and seem to be able to access schooling, housing and services in Arua more readily than poorer groups.** While they may be using social media to obtain this access, their “naturalised” use of social media (i.e. they do not see it as much as a tool) makes it harder to discern whether or not social media played a part in them reaching to where they are now. Several also rely on parents or older, established family members already residing in Arua to get “in”. It is however plausible that their social media networks, although mostly defined as social networks, at some point and in some way positively influenced their endeavours. It is worth noting that, as a large portion of this group also intends to leave Arua, it is also plausible that their social media use will assist them in their ability to carry through with these plans, unlike stayers/self-employed with similar hopes, but fewer real opportunities.

## Connecting to the discourse on conflict in Northern Uganda

The literature review presented in this report shows that a lot of research has gone into understanding Arua and West Nile in relation to the conflicts that have marred the region for decades. In summary, it is possible to construe of these narratives as four partially overlapping, and partially conflicting narratives: One is a historical narrative that still sits in the popular imagination, where the region is seen as remote

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<sup>7</sup> 90% refugee respondents intend to leave Arua or are thinking about leaving. Of these, 80% intended to return to South Sudan.

and inaccessible and where war and its geographic location has kept West Nile isolated. This is opposed to a narrative where the region has fostered a people – the Nubi – that have spread across the entire East African region and taken part in defining it. A third narrative projects West Nile as being backwards and stagnant, where its people are sometimes seen as locked into cultural, social, and economic developments inferior to southern Ugandan developments, forcefully so, one might claim, by the various national regimes. A fourth trajectory sees the region as constantly fluid and changing, often by force and violence, where populations have moved back and forth across nation state boundaries, becoming multi-faceted and multi-cultural along the way.

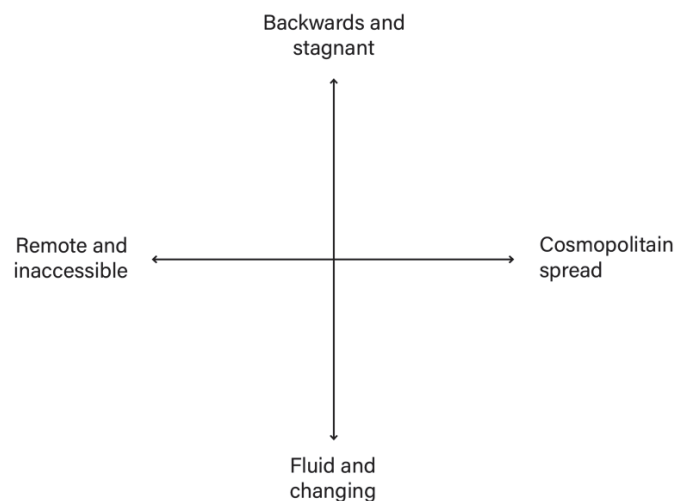


Figure 30: A four quadrant graph visualising the narratives presented in the literature on West Nile and its peoples.

In our research, respondents never brought up this history, despite the fact that the project, and our conversations with respondents, homed in on refugees, identity, belonging, and (lack of) opportunities. There could be a number of reasons for this. Firstly, our respondent group was young, the youngest barely having been born and the oldest being around 15 around the time of the peace agreement. Secondly, several are not from Arua, and many have not been born in the region, with a lot of host respondents born in Kampala.<sup>8</sup> Their connection to the region's tumultuous history might therefore be weak. This does not mean, of course, that the history of conflict is not relevant. It is possible to attribute some of the findings in this discussion to the structural fallout of Arua's and West Nile's pernicious history. Arua is, despite its efforts to become a vibrant city, still a place that struggles with underdevelopment and, provided many respondents' wish to leave, lack of opportunities that allow young people to stay and take part in developing the city. Despite recent years' efforts to create new trajectories for the region and its people, Arua is still locked into the narratives that the academic literature on the region focuses on. The fact that many respondents signal that they wish to move to Juba is perhaps testament to this. Juba is a capital city, one with long standing historical and cosmopolitan roots that still make it a viable centre for those seeking their fortunes and futures. It is, of course, also home to many refugees currently living in Arua.

<sup>8</sup> Many of these respondents cite Lugbara as their main language, indicating that they are not necessarily from Southern Uganda, but that their parents, or other family originally come from Arua or Northern Uganda. Their move from Kampala could therefore be seen as a move "back home".

## Conclusions

This research shows that social media plays an important part of the everyday lives of youth across social and economic spectrums in Arua. While they use social media much more actively than national figures suggest, it is more difficult to ascertain exactly what social media does for our respondents. What we can say with relative certainty is that those with greater wherewithal, schooling, and other resources have better access to social media than those who are poor. Not only do they have better access; there are also indications that their networks on social media are larger and of a different kind than those that are poor. This exacerbates divides between those with resources and those that lack resources. The possibility of using social media to obtain services, be provided opportunities, and to secure a better future is much higher for those that are already (relatively) well-off. The “catch” in the context of Arua is that refugees are among the social media “winners”. This has in part to do with the central wards of Arua (on which this research geographically focuses) being the destination for (resourced) urban South Sudanese refugees, many of whom settle in the city centre to pursue the education of their children and young adult family members. This also has to do with the networks that refugees have, that extend beyond the borders of Arua and Uganda. And with Arua and West Nile’s histories. Arua has developed quickly over the last years, but still struggles with structural problems from decades of underdevelopment and exploitation by colonial and post-colonial regimes. This means that the city is not able to adequately provide opportunities for its residents. Its young population thus seem to be looking outwards, seeking opportunity elsewhere. Social media becomes a potential tool for some – especially those with least resources – in trying to connect with the “outside” world, but provided their partial access to social media, and their limited networks, social media seems not be the tool they hope it might be.

It is to these problems Oxfam may structure its social media response. This research points to a few avenues in need of further exploration, based on **the following recommendations**:

**Provide assistance to the poorest groups to develop their social media networks.** Apart from the opportunity to provide livelihood opportunities that can help secure incomes for data usage, an approach might be to **support one-on-one contact with people in other situations, belonging to other socio-economic strata** than the poorest youth in Arua. Another way of thinking of networks could be derived from Pieterse’s concept of epistemic communities (2008); communities of varied stakeholders from different backgrounds and with different skills that come together in a common cause, often place-based. **Can these epistemic communities be digital in addition to physical? And can the poorer groups of youth be located centrally as stakeholders in such a group, with a twofold aim of developing place, but also individual opportunities through such a network?** How then, might Oxfam help develop such networks – both place-based as well as digitally?

**School is a central platform not only for education and potential opportunities based on education and training. It is also a social platform that allows youth to expand their social media networks, and possibly engage more qualitatively with social media.** There is a clear need to help school dropouts in getting back to school and (re-)connecting with these social networks. There is also a clear need to assist those that are self-employed who need to take part in training programs, which also could function as (social media) platforms that expand networks and might potentially create opportunity.

The goal with such activities would be to assist in expanding urban poor youths’ networks, connecting these in better and more synergetic ways to the international and South Sudanese networks that exist in the same city, but in other socio-economic strata and locations, thus creating more interaction between refugees and hosts, schoolers and dropouts. Not only would this create potential opportunity for the poor within Arua, but it might also tether young refugees and those with resources, i.e. those with the highest probability of leaving Arua to stay or – if leaving – to return.

While theories suggest that young people can be leveraged as local resources in epistemic communities or as “agents of change” that need to be contextually and geographically located in their respective communities, it could be interesting to investigate if social media can allow for a geographic dispersion of such epistemic communities, allowing for resourced groups to e.g. move back to South Sudan while digitally maintaining a presence in and contributing to the growth of local communities in Arua. If this is possible, what would such platforms look like, and what can actors like Oxfam provide in terms of support and services in order to achieve such goals?

The findings of this study will be used to build dialogue and conversations as well as enhance the understanding of the causes and consequences of inequalities, and to further inform ways to reduce them. The project seeks to not only engage in research but also use that to bring about change in policy and practice, alleviating the experiences of inequalities faced by migrants and displaced populations coming into cities who are generally rendered invisible. Drawing on the research carried out also in India and Lebanon, the next phase of the project will also investigate the transnational trends, barriers and opportunities linked to social media and inequality among refugees, migrants, and urban poor. This project seeks to expand work on social justice and draws on our extensive and ongoing field experience in crisis settings. The project ties in with Oxfam Regional Office in the Horn, East and Central Africa Urban Framework, deepening existing work on active citizenship, and expanding on digital rights engagement work.

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## Appendices

### Questions for potential respondents, pilot phase

1. Do you use social media (like Facebook) (yes/no) or digital communication (like WhatsApp) (yes/no)?
2. Do you have work? Yes/No
3. Where have you lived before coming to Arua?
4. Have you lived in a refugee settlement? (only for refugees)
5. Are you a registered or unregistered refugee? (only for refugees)
6. Why did you move to Arua?
7. Which ward do you live in (in Arua)?
8. How long have you lived in Arua?
9. Do you intend to stay in Arua?
10. Whom do you stay with?

### Pilot phase interview guide

#### *What we want to cover*

We wish to discuss three main issues with respondents: 1) Use of social media and digital communication, 2) livelihoods and work 3) Network building and mobility.

#### *Basic information we need from respondent*

Name, Contact details and Age

Education/training

Tenant or house owner (or part of family where someone owns house)? Whom do you stay with?

Are you a breadwinner?

#### *Discussion topics for network building and mobility*

Where they currently live (in Arua, in which ward), how long they have lived there, and how they came to live there. Let them talk about their background, whether they come from a rural or urban place. Let them describe the places they have lived before. What made them decide to move, and what made them move to the exact place (house) they are living in now in Arua.

If refugees: Are you a registered or unregistered refugee? Have you lived in a refugee settlement? How did you find that experience?

Whether they have a large or small network in Arua. Let them describe what kind of network this is. For work, for economic reasons (e.g. savings group), social network of friends, family, organisation or NGO? Let them talk about whether they have networks other places than Arua, and what kind of networks these are. Whether they use social media or digital communication to keep in touch in their networks. What kind of information is usually shared in these digital networks? Do they only *receive* information or do you also *share* information? Do they feel that their digital networks are bigger or smaller than their physical/in-person networks. What does that mean to them? Is it important to meet face to face, or is it just as OK to communicate digitally?

Are there certain groups (types of people) in Arua that you do not have any contact with? How do you feel about these groups?

Ask the respondent to describe Arua, what it looks like, the different parts of the city, and who lives where. Which areas are most important to the respondent, and why? Does the respondent have contacts in all parts of the city, or does the respondent mostly stay in one part of the city, with one group of people? If the respondent doesn't use all of the city or isn't able to communicate regularly with other groups of people, ask why this is. Does this affect the respondent's ability to get work?

Were you better off before (moving to Arua) or better off now? What are your plans for the future, and will digital communication help you in achieving these plans? Do you have digital networks or other kinds of networks that provide you with information on how things are in other places, towns, or cities? Does that information make you think that it's good you're in Arua, or does it make you consider moving? Where do you get access to this information, and who provides it?

If not already answered: Do you intend to stay in Arua, or are you planning on moving elsewhere? If so, where to and why?

#### *Discussion topics for social media and digital communication*

Do you use social media and or digital communication? What kinds of social media and digital communication services do you use? Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, others? What is normally the kind of information you get in your feed? Is that information interesting to you, and what do you use it for? Give examples... Do you now receive more or less information through digital means than before? Is it too much or too little?

Is the information you get through social media and digital communication different from what you get in your neighbourhood, and face to face from people? How is it different? Do you know if the digital information you are getting is different from your friends, family, fellow students, or colleagues? Arua is made up of many different people. Some are born in Arua, others are not. Some are poor, others are more affluent. Some are young, and others are old. If they have access to social media and digital communication, do you think they get different information from one another? What kind of information do you think they are getting?

#### *If not already covered*

If refugee: do you think non-refugees get different information from you? If non-refugee: do you think refugees get different information from you?

Is some of the information you get political? Critical of developments? Do you trust the information you get online? Which sources do you trust the most, and which do you not trust? (e.g. friends, family, government, organisations). Do you feel that there are restrictions on what you and others can say and share on social media or in WhatsApp groups? Are you sometimes afraid of sharing certain information, or afraid that others might find out that you've received certain information? Have you ever unfollowed someone or left e.g. a WhatsApp group? If so why?

Other than social media and digital communication, how do you get your information?

#### *Discussion topics for livelihoods and work*

Do you have work? Are you working for someone, or do you run your own business? What different types of work have you done before? Would you say that the work you do is informal or informal? Do you work in a specific part of the city, or many places? Where, and why?

Do you go to school or vocational training? How long have you schooled for and which training do you have, or plan to undertake? Is the work you do or the jobs you carry out related to your background? E.g. where you come from, who your family is, or what training you have?

How much of the information that you get from social media and digital communication is related to work or employment opportunities? Who provides this information? Government, institutions, organisations, friends, business associates, relatives?

Have you ever been given work/found business opportunities because of information that you gained through social media or digital communication? What was this, and how did it happen?

Have you provided others with information through social media or digital communication that allowed them to seek work opportunities? If yes, what was it, and who did you send it to? Did they get the job?

## KI interview guide

What are the differences between youth in Arua? Ask the respondent to provide examples! Let the respondent speak. If he/she doesn't find any examples, ask if there might be differences between such things as: Those who go to school, those who don't? Those who work, those that do not have work? Gender?

After respondent provides examples, ask if there also are differences due to the following: Background, such as ethnicity? Background, such as national status? Background, such as where they live in Arua? Ask the respondent to provide examples!

Are some youth poorer and some richer in Arua? If yes, why is this? What distinguishes the rich and the poor, except for their money?

Are there any clear groups of youth in Arua that the respondent can easily identify? Ask the respondent to provide examples! If examples are needed: students, traders, refugees

Ask the respondent to consider the entire population (not only youth), and ask if there are an "us" and a "them" in Arua? Is there any opposition among residents? If so which groups, and why?

Who are the youth that the KI works with?

What does the KI focus on in his/her work?

What are the most common issues that youth take up with him/her? And how does the KI and his/her team work with that?

Are there noticeable differences between youth in use of mobile phones? If yes, between which groups?

Are there noticeable differences between youth in use of social media? If yes, what is the difference? Give examples. Between which groups is there a difference?

Does the KI think that youth who have work use SoMe and digital communication differently than those that do not have work? If yes, how? And why?

Does the KI have a social media presence, and does he/she interact with youth in Arua on social media? Give examples!

Does he/she interact with youth in Arua through digital communication (e.g. WhatsApp)?

Is it more effective for the KI to use SoMe/Digital communication in working with youth, or is face-to-face interaction better? How are they different?

## Follow up interviews – interview guide

### *Tell me about your family*

where do you come from?

where do you live now?

how would you describe the neighbourhood you live in?

what are your plans for the future?

If leaver: why?

If leaving, are you intending to leave with other family members/whole family or alone?

If leaving, do you think you would come back to Arua for any reason and why?

### *Tell me about what you do*

how is business/school?

What is your household income?

are there others that do the same?

what kind of work/education is available in Arua? What kind of work do people do?

Are things better elsewhere?

### *Tell me about the others*

Who are your friends?

Where do you normally meet them and what do you do?

Are you part of a network or organisation?

Are there other groups or networks that you don't belong to?

(following up on description of own neighbourhood) describe other neighbourhoods in Arua? What are the differences between neighbourhoods?

Are people different in the different neighbourhoods?

Are some people more successful than others? Who are they?

Are some people less successful? Who are they?

Who do you trust, and who do you not trust?

### *Tell me about SoMe and DC*

How do you communicate with your network/friends?

Can you provide examples of the Social Media posts that you get?

If self-employed: do you use SoMe actively for work?

Does it help you? If yes, how?

If refugee: do you follow SoMe from home? If yes, how is that interesting to you?

What kind of SoMe do you trust, and what do you not trust? Why? Give examples.

Would you be able to live the life you live (or work you do) without SoMe? If yes/no, why?

Do you think the people (described above) who are more/less successful have other SoMe habits and streams than you? How are they different?

Do you think SoMe will help you in the future, in reaching your goals? If yes/no, why?

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