



Aid Allocation by Household Headcount: Population Growth and Resource Pressure in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between aid allocation by household headcount, population growth, and resource pressure in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda. Using qualitative methods, the research explores how humanitarian assistance structures shape household formation, reproductive decision-making, and livelihood strategies in a protracted displacement context. The findings reveal that population growth in Nakivale is not primarily driven by new refugee arrivals but by internal dynamics linked to hunger, insecurity, gendered survival strategies, and aid policies that tie assistance to household size. Drawing on Malthusian population theory, dependency theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the study demonstrates that headcount-based aid allocation unintentionally incentivizes household expansion as a survival strategy. Women are disproportionately affected, with limited livelihood opportunities, exposure to sexual violence, and inadequate reproductive health services contributing to unplanned pregnancies and population growth. Refugees exhibit agency through informal trade, agriculture, and integration with host communities, yet these strategies remain constrained by structural dependency and resource scarcity. The study contributes to refugee scholarship by highlighting how humanitarian governance systems shape demographic behaviour and resource pressure. It recommends rethinking aid allocation models to incorporate livelihood capacity, gendered vulnerability, and long-term sustainability in protracted refugee settlements.

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Keywords: *Refugees, Demography, Population*

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1. Introduction

Due to a number of factors, including but not limited to host country insecurity and rising discontent in both developing and established nations, the discussions surrounding refugees and their interactions with host populations are continuing to garner more attention. According to Sultani et al. (2024), 100 million individuals have been forced to leave their homes due to persecution, war, natural disasters, or other threats on a global scale. A large number of them are confined in settlement camps, where they have the option of staying to receive aid from humanitarian organizations or leaving to integrate into host communities and look for opportunities within the framework of Uganda's refugee policy, which permits free movement both inside and outside the settlement. Worthy to note is that by 2009, 3.6 million refugees, or 25% of the world's total, received asylum from least developed nations (Hopgood, 2010). These migrations frequently have numerous drawbacks, but they can also have positive effects on both the hosts and the refugees, either by enhancing their standard of living or impairing their means of subsistence. Nevertheless, despite the fact that many communities, particularly in developing nations, aim to slow down the rate of population development, the situation with regard to refugees appears to be the opposite, with many seeing large numbers of household members as a means of subsistence. According to Kouni (2018), the international community provides developing nations that accept refugees with financial and technical support.

Kouni noted that this assistance usually takes care of the refugees' basic needs and could also pay for other expenses incurred by the host nation as a result of their presence (Kouni, 2018). When you visit the Nakivale refugee settlement, the first thing you hear is the UNHCR's help and the concerns of people who receive far more than others. However, there are also those who rejoice new births because they see them as extra sources of cash as every new member comes with potential aid reception after registration. Although the UN's 2016 Global Compact on Refugees provided a framework to address refugee protection in situations of prolonged displacement as well as for those who host them, it has not packaged itself well in addressing population increase among refugees (Björkhaug, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the variables that affect the number of refugees in the Nakivale refugee settlement as well as any potential pressure or complementing variables on resources.

1.1. Background of the study

One of the 11 refugee settlements in Uganda, Nakivale is spread across 185 km² and is situated in Isingiro district of Southwestern Uganda (Björkhaug, 2020). The settlement was founded in 1958, and officially recognised as a refugee settlement in 1960 through the Uganda Gazette General Notice No. 19. As of 2020, over 132,000 refugees from various African nations were accommodated in the Nakivale refugee settlement, more than twice as many as in 2014 (58,000) and it is believed that the number has risen to

over 171,387 refugees. Bjørkhaug (2020) states that in addition to providing labor capital, the growing population has put strain on the available resources in Nakivale, which has resulted in conflict both within and between host communities and refugee populations. Bagenda et al. (2003) connected social tensions to conflicts with the host population living on land reserved for refugees. To further address these concerns about resource constraints, the Ugandan government has implemented an open-door policy and self-sufficiency approach since 1999. However, the economic independence shown by the reports was for a refugee camp of relatively small group in Nakivale; Most people still live in poverty (Kigozi, 2017) and therefore, their results have been criticized for portraying "refugees in Uganda as better than they really are" (Bagenda et al., 2003).

A number of organizations are providing humanitarian assistance to refugees in Nakivale, including the frontline United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), which is working with the Government of Uganda through the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), other agencies of the United Nations, NGOs and civil society to provide protection and support to those affected. It is important to note that little attention has been paid to the increase in the number of refugees, especially those who have stayed much longer, despite the periodic data on population changes carried out by the UNHCR. Currently, Nakivale refugee settlement is home to refugees from a number of countries including; Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Eritrea and a small size of refugees from South Sudan. The refugee population in Nakivale, especially those in a protracted refugee situation, has continued to grow, if only deliberately, to obtain higher benefits from UNHCR and other organizations. Given the limited research done in this particular case, this research aims to discover the causes of the increase in fertility in the Base camp zone of Nakivale refugee settlement and the possible impact on resources.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Refugee Demographics and Population Growth

Understanding aid allocation in refugee settlements requires careful attention to demographic composition, household headcount, and population growth trends. Existing literature highlights that refugee populations are not homogeneous and that age structure, fertility patterns, and household size significantly shape vulnerability and resource needs. According to UNHCR data cited by Amara and Aljunid (2014), between two and four percent of urban refugees in Africa are elderly persons aged 60 years and above. Although this figure appears modest, it hides important variations between urban and rural refugee settings. Rural settlements, such as Nakivale in southwestern Uganda, often exhibit higher dependency ratios due to the concentration of children and elderly refugees, while economically active youth frequently migrate to urban centres (Crisp, 2003; Tulibaleka et al., 2021). The literature further suggests that population growth in refugee-hosting regions exacerbates pressure on already limited resources. Myers (2002) argues that population pressure on land and natural resources leads to environmental degradation, which in turn pushes displaced populations to adopt coping strategies such as relocation, encroachment on host community land, or integration into surrounding rural economies. In Sub-Saharan Africa, refugee numbers increased by approximately 28% between 1960 and 2006, with a population growth rate of around 2.2% alongside deforestation rates of 0.5–0.7% annually (Roncoli et al., 2002).

These figures illustrate the interlinkages between demographic expansion, environmental stress, and resource scarcity. However, much of the literature remains descriptive rather than analytical when it comes to household headcount as a determinant of aid allocation. While population growth is frequently discussed at the macro level, fewer studies critically examine how rising household sizes often driven by high fertility rates, unintended pregnancies, and extended family arrangements translate into greater demand for humanitarian assistance at the micro level. This gap is particularly significant in protracted refugee settlements such as Nakivale, where aid distribution is often based on household size without sufficient consideration of intra-household dependency, resource access, or livelihood capacity.

2.2. Physical and Economic Resources among Refugees

Access to physical and economic resources is a central theme in refugee studies, especially in rural settlements where livelihood opportunities are constrained. Uganda's refugee settlements are predominantly located in rural areas, which Crisp (2003) notes are often unattractive to young and economically active refugees. This spatial arrangement interacts with broader development trends in Sub-Saharan Africa, where rural urban migration is increasingly common among youth seeking employment, education, and social mobility (Kaiser, 2006). As a result, refugee settlements such as Nakivale are frequently characterized by populations that are disproportionately composed of children, women, and elderly persons, groups with limited income-generating capacity. The literature suggests that this demographic imbalance reinforces dependency on humanitarian aid. Kaiser (2006) argues that limited livelihood options within settlements leave refugees with few alternatives beyond reliance on food assistance and basic services. Although some refugees engage in subsistence agriculture, petty trade, or casual labor, these activities are often insufficient to meet household needs, particularly in large households with high dependency ratios. Browne (2006) notes that in Nakivale, some refugee groups have achieved a degree of self-reliance through farming, yet such success is uneven and highly dependent on land availability, soil quality, and household labor capacity among other factors.

The concept of "protracted refugee situations" is particularly relevant in this context. UNHCR defines such situations as those where refugees have lived in exile for more than five years without immediate prospects for durable solutions (Crisp, 2003). Uganda hosts a significant number of refugees in protracted situations, and the literature suggests that prolonged displacement increases vulnerability rather than resilience over time. Browne (2006) contends that the longer refugees remain displaced, the less likely they are to repatriate, while Kaiser (2006) observes that extended exile often results in deteriorating livelihood options and deepening poverty. Critically, some scholars argue that prolonged reliance on aid fosters what is commonly referred to as a "dependency syndrome." While this concept has been contested for oversimplifying refugee behaviour, it remains relevant in discussions of aid allocation by household headcount. As birth rates increase within settlements, household sizes expand, leading to higher aid entitlements under distribution systems that prioritize numerical household composition. This dynamic risk creates perverse incentives, whereby larger households receive more assistance without corresponding increases in productive capacity, thereby intensifying pressure on limited resources.

2.3. Refugee Self-Reliance Strategy in Uganda

Uganda's refugee policy framework is widely regarded as progressive, particularly its emphasis on self-reliance and freedom of movement. The Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) aims to enable refugees to utilize their skills and knowledge to meet their own needs and reduce dependency on humanitarian assistance. According to Svedberg (2014), refugee settlements under the SRS differ from traditional camps in that they emphasize semi-permanent infrastructure, including schools, clinics, boreholes, and brick housing. These features are intended to create an enabling environment for sustainable livelihoods (Bagenda et al., 2003). Despite these intentions, the literature presents mixed assessments of the effectiveness of the SRS. Hovil (2007) critically argues that the settlement system itself contributes to the protracted nature of refugee situations by spatially and economically isolating refugees. While refugees in Uganda have the legal right to work and move freely, structural barriers often prevent meaningful economic integration. Browne (2006) highlights that refugees must compete with Ugandan nationals for low-paying jobs, frequently under conditions of discrimination and labor exploitation. Kaiser (2006) further notes that employment opportunities are often unstable, poorly paid, and insufficient to support large households.

From a critical perspective, the SRS appears to inadequately address the demographic realities of refugee households. The literature rarely interrogates how household headcount, fertility rates, and dependency ratios intersect with self-reliance objectives. Dijk (2022) identifies several obstacles to refugee self-reliance, including lack of social networks, language barriers, prejudice, and limited formal education. These constraints disproportionately affect women, elderly refugees, and large households, undermining the assumption that access to land and basic services alone can foster economic independence. Moreover, the freedom of movement granted to refugees has unintended demographic consequences. Tulibaleka et al. (2021) observe that many young refugees migrate to urban areas in search of work, leaving behind settlements populated largely by dependents. This phenomenon reduces the productive labor force within settlements while maintaining or increasing household sizes, thereby amplifying reliance on aid. The example of Somali refugees establishing economic enclaves in Kampala's Kisenyi parish (Bagenda et al., 2003) underscores the uneven outcomes of Uganda's refugee policy and highlights spatial inequalities in access to economic opportunities.

2.4. Gender Dynamics, Population Growth, and Resource Mobilization

Gender dynamics play a critical role in shaping population growth, household composition, and resource pressure in refugee settlements. Larsson (2019) documents widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Nakivale, including rape and sexual exploitation, coupled with limited access to justice for survivors. These experiences have profound demographic implications, as SGBV is linked to unintended pregnancies that increase household sizes and overall settlement population. Liebling et al. (2020) emphasize that SGBV occurs at multiple stages of displacement during conflict, flight, and settlement and that refugee camps and settlements can become sites of continued vulnerability rather than protection. Horn et al. (2014) further establish a connection between resource scarcity, particularly food and water shortages, and increased risks of SGBV. In Nakivale, young girls are reported to face heightened vulnerability near water sources, where sexual abuse has resulted in unintended pregnancies and expanded

household headcounts. Comparative evidence from post-conflict and disaster-affected contexts such as Haiti, Colombia, and Sierra Leone demonstrates that poverty and economic insecurity are strongly correlated with higher rates of SGBV (Horn et al., 2014). This literature suggests that gender-based violence is not only a protection issue but also a driver of demographic change and resource pressure. Yet, existing studies often fail to integrate gendered analyses into discussions of aid allocation mechanisms. Aid distribution based on household size may inadvertently obscure the ways in which violence, coercion, and unequal power relations shape household formation and growth. Critically, the literature reveals a gap in linking gender dynamics directly to aid allocation frameworks. While population growth is frequently acknowledged as a challenge, there is limited examination of how structural gender inequalities contribute to increasing household headcounts and, by extension, rising aid demands. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more equitable and sustainable humanitarian interventions in Nakivale and similar settlements.

2.5. Synthesis and Identified Gaps

Overall, the literature demonstrates that population growth, household headcount, and resource pressure are deeply interconnected in refugee settlements. However, several gaps remain. First, while demographic trends are well documented, there is insufficient critical analysis of how aid allocation systems based on household size interact with fertility patterns, dependency ratios, and livelihood constraints. Second, the effectiveness of Uganda's Self-Reliance Strategy is contested, particularly in relation to large and vulnerable households that face structural barriers to economic participation. Third, gender dynamics and SGBV are often treated as separate protection concerns rather than integral components of population growth and resource allocation debates. This study seeks to address these gaps by critically examining aid allocation by household headcount in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, with particular attention to population growth and resulting resource pressure. By integrating demographic, economic, and gendered perspectives, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how humanitarian assistance frameworks can both alleviate and inadvertently exacerbate vulnerability in protracted refugee settings.

3. Conceptual approach

This study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework drawing on Malthusian population theory, dependency theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how population growth, household headcount-based aid allocation, and resource pressure interact within the protracted refugee context of Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda. While each framework has limitations when applied independently, their combined use allows for a nuanced analysis of demographic dynamics, structural dependency, and livelihood constraints in humanitarian settings.

3.1. Malthusian Population Theory and Resource Pressure

Malthusian population theory, originally articulated by Thomas Malthus in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), posits that population growth tends to increase geometrically while food production grows arithmetically, leading inevitably to resource scarcity unless checked by "preventive" or "positive" controls

such as delayed fertility, famine, disease, or conflict (Malthus, 1798). Although widely critiqued for its deterministic assumptions, Malthusian theory remains influential in contemporary debates on population pressure, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity, particularly in low-income and crisis-affected contexts. In refugee settlements such as Nakivale, the relevance of Malthusian insights lies in the observable tension between rapid population growth and finite natural and humanitarian resources. Empirical studies indicate that refugee-hosting areas in Sub-Saharan Africa experience increased pressure on land, forests, water, and soil fertility as populations expand (Myers, 2002; Roncoli et al., 2002). In Nakivale, population growth is driven not only by new refugee arrivals but also by high fertility rates, unintended pregnancies linked to sexual and gender-based violence, and prolonged displacement that normalizes family formation within the settlement context (Larsson, 2019; Liebling et al., 2020).

Aid allocation systems based on household headcount may unintentionally reinforce Malthusian pressures by scaling assistance in proportion to household size without adequately accounting for resource sustainability or productive capacity. As household sizes grow, demand for food rations, land, water, and social services increases, intensifying competition both within the settlement and with host communities. From a neo-Malthusian perspective, this dynamic risk creating a cycle in which population growth continually outpaces the capacity of humanitarian and environmental systems to respond, thereby exacerbating scarcity and vulnerability (Myers, 2002). However, critics of Malthusian theory argue that scarcity is not merely a function of population size but of political, economic, and institutional arrangements that shape access to resources (Sen, 1982). This critique is particularly relevant in refugee contexts, where legal restrictions, market exclusion, and aid dependency limit refugees' ability to convert resources into sustainable livelihoods. Consequently, while Malthusian theory helps explain resource pressure, it must be complemented by frameworks that account for structural inequalities and power relations.

3.2. Dependency Theory and Aid-Based Livelihoods

Dependency theory offers a critical lens for examining the structural conditions that perpetuate reliance on external assistance in refugee settlements. Originating in development economics and political economy, dependency theory argues that peripheral populations become economically dependent on external actors due to unequal power relations and historical patterns of exploitation (Dos Santos, 2019; Gunder Frank, 1966). In humanitarian contexts, this framework has been adapted to analyse how prolonged aid provision can entrench dependency rather than foster self-sufficiency (Harrell-Bond, 1986). In Nakivale, dependency theory is particularly useful for interrogating the long-term effects of aid allocation by household headcount. While humanitarian assistance is essential for survival, prolonged reliance on food aid and basic services may reduce incentives or opportunities for refugees to pursue autonomous livelihood strategies, especially when access to land, capital, and labor markets is constrained (Browne, 2006; Crisp, 2003; Kaiser, 2006). Browne (2006) notes that the longer refugees remain in exile, the less likely they are to repatriate and the more entrenched their dependence on aid becomes. Aid systems that reward household expansion with increased assistance can unintentionally reinforce dependency dynamics. Larger households receive more rations, yet these rations often remain insufficient to meet all needs, particularly in contexts of inflation, ration cuts, or resource scarcity. This creates

a paradox in which households remain dependent on aid while lacking viable pathways toward economic independence. From a dependency theory perspective, refugees are positioned as passive recipients within a system that limits their agency and reinforces structural vulnerability (Harrell-Bond, 1986). Nevertheless, dependency theory has been criticized for portraying beneficiaries as lacking initiative and for underestimating their adaptive strategies (Bakewell, 2008). In Nakivale, evidence of subsistence farming, petty trade, and urban migration among refugees suggests that dependency is not absolute but rather shaped by opportunity structures. This critique underscores the need for a framework that captures both constraints and agency, which is addressed by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework.

3.3. Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Refugee Agency

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), developed by Chambers and Conway (1992) and later refined by the UK Department for International Development (DfID, 1999), provides a people-centered approach to understanding how individuals and households construct livelihoods under conditions of vulnerability. The framework conceptualizes livelihoods as a function of access to five forms of capital: human, social, natural, physical, and financial, mediated by institutional structures and vulnerability contexts. Applying the SLF to Nakivale highlights how household headcount intersects with livelihood outcomes. Large households may possess greater labor potential, yet this advantage is often undermined by high dependency ratios, limited education, health challenges, and restricted access to markets (Dijk, 2022). Natural capital, particularly land, is a critical asset in Nakivale, where refugees engage in subsistence agriculture; however, increasing population density reduces plot sizes and soil productivity, limiting returns (Browne, 2006). The SLF also draws attention to institutional processes, including aid allocation mechanisms, refugee policies, and gender norms. Uganda's Self-Reliance Strategy aims to enhance refugees' livelihood assets, but structural barriers such as discrimination, language constraints, and limited employment opportunities restrict its effectiveness (Hovil, 2007; Kaiser, 2006). Gender-based violence further erodes human and social capital, contributing to unintended population growth and undermining women's livelihood prospects (Horn et al., 2014; Larsson, 2019). Unlike Malthusian or dependency perspectives alone, the SLF recognizes refugees as active agents who negotiate constraints and pursue diverse strategies, including urban migration, informal employment, and social networking. However, the framework has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing power relations and macro-level political dynamics (Scoones, 2013). In this study, the SLF is therefore used in conjunction with dependency theory to balance agency with structural analysis.

3.4. Conceptual Integration

Conceptually, this study views household headcount-based aid allocation as a mediating mechanism between population growth and resource pressure. Population growth increases household sizes, which in turn shape aid entitlements, livelihood strategies, and dependency patterns. These processes unfold within a context of limited natural resources, gendered vulnerabilities, and constrained economic opportunities. By integrating Malthusian theory, dependency theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the study captures the complex interplay between demographic dynamics, structural constraints, and refugee agency in Nakivale Refugee Settlement.

4. Methodology

This study was conducted at the Base camp zone of the Nakivale Refugee Settlement in the District of Isingiro, in the southwest of Uganda. The study area was chosen because it was one of the first refugee settlements to be established in Uganda and because it seemed to fit the goals of the research for the generation of reliable data. Refugees from a variety of nations, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and a small number from South Sudan, made up the community. These engaged in trading, small-scale farming, and several other small-scale enterprises, while others carried out fishing at the Nakivale Lake. This research employed a qualitative, ethnographic methodology to explore population growth and resource pressures at Nakivale's Base Camp zone. Purposive sampling, using a snowball technique, identified 30 adult refugees including 10 men and 20 women each with households containing more than two children. Data collection comprised in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, enabling detailed insight into household dynamics, reproductive behaviours, livelihood strategies, and resource acquisition practices. Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed thematically, following Rice and Ezzy's coding procedures to identify recurring patterns related to population expansion and resource constraints Rice and Ezzy (1999). This approach facilitated contextualized interpretations of refugees' lived experiences, including aid dependence, social interactions, and reproductive health challenges. The analysis emphasized participants' subjective meanings and social structures influencing demographic choices and resource access. By prioritizing narrative depth over numerical quantification, the methodology captured complex socio-cultural determinants of population phenomena and how they translate into resource pressures within the settlement environment.

5. Findings

This chapter presents and analyses the empirical findings of the study on aid allocation by household headcount, population growth, and resource pressure in the Base Camp Zone of Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda. The findings are drawn from in-depth interviews and field observations conducted among refugees residing in the settlement, with particular attention to how access to resources, humanitarian assistance, gender relations, and survival strategies shape household size and population dynamics. The chapter is organized thematically to reflect the lived realities of refugees rather than abstract categories of aid or policy. It focuses on how refugees mobilize resources, negotiate scarcity, and respond to humanitarian systems that allocate assistance largely on the basis of household size. Throughout the chapter, emphasis is placed on the voices of respondents, whose narratives illuminate the complex and often unintended consequences of aid systems within a context of protracted displacement. It is important to note that this chapter is descriptive and analytical, not interpretive in a theoretical sense. While the findings reveal patterns that speak to broader debates on dependency, population growth, and sustainability, explicit engagement with theory and literature is reserved for the discussion chapter. The purpose here is to present what the data show, how refugees understand their own situations, and how population growth and resource pressure manifest in everyday life within the Base Camp Zone of Nakivale.

5.1. Household Resources and Livelihoods in the Base Camp Zone of Nakivale

5.1.1. Availability and Use of Natural Resources

The findings indicate that natural resources, particularly land, play a central role in the livelihoods of refugees in the Base Camp Zone of Nakivale. Access to land was repeatedly described by respondents as both a symbol of stability and a practical necessity for survival. Many refugees reported that upon arrival in the settlement, acquiring land was one of their primary aspirations, as it offered the possibility of food production, income generation, and reduced dependence on humanitarian assistance. However, access to land was neither uniform nor secure. While some households had been allocated plots for cultivation, others had lost access to land over time due to poverty-related pressures. Several respondents explained that land was frequently exchanged for food during periods of acute hunger or sold to raise capital for small businesses. In these cases, land ceased to function as a productive asset and instead became a consumable resource, liquidated in response to immediate survival needs. Those who retained land primarily used it for subsistence farming, with bananas emerging as the most commonly cultivated crop. Bananas were grown both for household consumption and, in some cases, for sale within the settlement or to nearby host communities. Respondents emphasized that banana cultivation aligned with local agricultural practices in Mbarara and Isingiro districts, making it easier to integrate into local markets, albeit at a very small scale. A small number of long-term residents reported owning livestock, particularly cattle, although herd sizes were generally limited. These households described milk production as an important supplementary source of income, allowing them to generate cash for basic needs such as salt, soap, school materials, and medical expenses. Nevertheless, livestock ownership remained the exception rather than the norm, constrained by limited grazing land, lack of capital, and insecurity. Overall, while natural resources were present in the Base Camp Zone, their productive potential was significantly constrained by poverty, population pressure, and the precarious nature of refugee livelihoods. Land and livestock functioned less as pathways to accumulation and more as fragile buffers against starvation.

5.1.2. Financial Resources and Informal Income Sources

In addition to natural resources, refugees relied on a range of financial resources, both formal and informal, to meet daily needs. These included humanitarian remittances, income from petty trade, casual labor, and remittances from relatives living abroad or in countries of origin. One of the most significant non-humanitarian financial resources identified in the findings was family remittances. Some respondents reported receiving money from relatives who had migrated to Europe, North America, or other African countries. Others maintained contact with family members who had remained in their countries of origin and occasionally sent financial assistance when security conditions allowed. However, respondents were clear that remittances were unevenly distributed and highly unreliable. Not all refugees had relatives abroad, and even among those who did, support was often irregular. Conflict, displacement, and poverty in countries of origin frequently limited the ability of relatives to send money. In some cases, family members who had stayed behind were themselves attempting to flee and join refugee settlements in Uganda, reversing the expected direction of support. One respondent articulated this reality as follows:

“We have no brothers or sisters here, and even if you call any members of the host community for help, they won’t come because they think we have money since we are foreigners. They also know that some of us have people abroad who can send money, but in reality, many of our people are still suffering. I am from Congo, and there are many rebel groups there. Even if one is defeated, another comes. Some people can get money from relatives whose areas are stable, but not everyone.”

This account highlights a recurring theme in the data: the perception of refugee wealth among host communities contrasts sharply with refugees’ lived experiences of deprivation. Refugees were often assumed to have access to external financial support, which reduced sympathy and willingness to assist, even when refugees were facing extreme hardship. Petty trade and informal businesses constituted another source of income, though opportunities were limited. Some refugees operated small salons, sold dried fish, vegetables, or second-hand clothing, or engaged in informal services. These activities were highly vulnerable to shocks, including market fluctuations, illness, theft, and destruction of business premises. Several respondents reported losing their businesses due to fire, eviction, or lack of capital to restock, forcing them to revert entirely to aid dependence.

5.2. Humanitarian Assistance and Remittances from unhcr and wfp

5.2.1. Structure of Humanitarian Remittances

Humanitarian assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP) constituted a central pillar of survival for many households in the Base Camp Zone. The findings reveal a structured classification system through which refugees were categorized and assigned varying levels of assistance, combining cash transfers and food rations. According to respondents and corroborated by information from humanitarian officials, refugees were grouped into several categories: Highly vulnerable individuals, including the elderly, persons with chronic illnesses, physical disabilities, and severe impairments, received a monthly cash allowance of 24,000 Ugandan Shillings (approximately USD 6.5). Partially dependent households, considered not yet self-reliant, received 12,000 Ugandan Shillings (approximately USD 3.2) per month. Self-reliant refugees received no regular food or cash assistance. New arrivals, typically within their first one to two months in the settlement, received 36,000 Ugandan Shillings (approximately USD 10), along with food items including maize flour, beans, and cooking oil. While this system was designed to target assistance based on vulnerability and self-reliance, the findings reveal widespread confusion, dissatisfaction, and mistrust regarding how classifications were determined.

5.2.2. Perceived Opacity and Contestation of Classification

Many respondents expressed frustration at being removed from assistance categories without clear explanation. Several refugees reported that they were classified as self-reliant despite lacking stable income, productive assets, or functional businesses. This perceived arbitrariness undermined trust in humanitarian institutions and heightened anxiety among households already facing food insecurity. One respondent stated:

“I don’t know what they used to decide to remove me from the remittance list. Even the salon I used to earn from was destroyed. All I have now is the money my children receive. How do they know I have seven children from different men because of this? Someone may do that to continue getting money, because when you register a new born, you get support.”

This account reveals two critical findings. First, refugees often did not understand the criteria used to assess self-reliance, leading to perceptions of injustice. Second, the respondent explicitly linked child registration and household size to continued access to assistance, suggesting that fertility and household expansion were understood as survival strategies within the aid system. The findings indicate that humanitarian assistance, while essential, was experienced not merely as support but as a site of negotiation, contestation, and strategic adaptation. Refugees actively interpreted and responded to aid structures in ways that shaped household decisions, including those related to family size.

5.2.3. Interim Summary of Part 1 Findings

The findings presented in this section demonstrate that refugees in the Base Camp Zone of Nakivale navigate a complex and fragile resource environment. Natural resources such as land and livestock offer limited and insecure livelihood opportunities, while financial resources from remittances and informal trade are unevenly distributed and unreliable. Humanitarian assistance from UNHCR and WFP remains a critical lifeline but is structured through classification systems that are poorly understood and widely contested. Crucially, access to aid is closely associated with household composition, particularly the presence of children, shaping how refugees perceive survival strategies in conditions of chronic scarcity. These dynamics set the foundation for subsequent findings on gender relations, sexual violence, hunger-driven fertility, and population growth, which are explored in the next sections of the chapter.

5.3. Sexual Violence, Rape, and Insecurity in the Base Camp Zone

The findings indicate that rape and sexual violence are pervasive yet underreported realities in the Base Camp Zone of Nakivale. Respondents linked rape to multiple, intersecting factors including hunger, resource scarcity, marital breakdown, weak security structures, and informal dispute resolution mechanisms within the settlement. Young girls were identified as particularly vulnerable, especially those experiencing hunger. Several respondents described situations in which girls sought assistance from men who promised food or support but later coerced or forced them into sexual acts. These encounters often resulted in pregnancy and, in many cases, informal marriages arranged between families to avoid legal intervention. Where perpetrators were identified and belonged to the same ethnic group as the victim, families frequently resolved cases internally, deliberately avoiding the police. In cases involving perpetrators from different ethnic groups, respondents reported that offenders often fled the settlement, leaving victims pregnant and unsupported. These outcomes contributed directly to unplanned household formation and population increase. Some male respondents claimed that false accusations occurred, arguing that a small number of women used allegations of rape to force marriage or extract compensation. Importantly, these claims are

presented here as respondents' perceptions, not verified occurrences. Their presence in the data reflects a broader climate of mistrust, gender tension, and contested narratives around sexual violence in the settlement. Security weaknesses were repeatedly highlighted. Respondents emphasized that the number of police and security personnel was insufficient relative to the settlement's population size, limiting effective protection and deterrence. This insecurity normalized sexual violence and reduced confidence in formal justice mechanisms.

5.4. Factors Influencing population growth in the Base Camp Zone

5.4.1. Hunger as a Driver of Household Expansion

Hunger emerged as the most consistently cited driver of population growth. Nearly all respondents reported eating fewer than two meals per day, with many experiencing days without food. Households not receiving UNHCR or WFP assistance were particularly vulnerable. In this context, having children was widely perceived as a survival strategy. Respondents explained that registering a new-born increased a household's likelihood of receiving food or cash assistance. As a result, fertility was directly linked to aid access, even though additional children intensified long-term resource pressure. Hunger also affected agricultural productivity. Even households with land lacked the financial capacity to hire labor, forcing them to wait for humanitarian rations before cultivating. This cyclical dependency reinforced food insecurity and incentivized reliance on aid-linked household expansion.

5.4.2. Prostitution and Transactional Sex

The findings reveal that transactional sex was common in the Base Camp Zone, though rarely acknowledged openly. Women described exchanging sex for food or cash to support their households, including husbands and children. These practices were framed not as commercial sex work but as survival strategies driven by desperation. Pregnancies resulting from transactional sex contributed to population growth and frequently triggered disputes over paternity and responsibility. Respondents reported that such disputes sometimes escalated into violence, including fatal incidents, highlighting the severe social consequences of resource scarcity.

5.4.3. Integration with Host Communities

Population growth was also influenced by integration with host communities. Members of the host population had increasingly settled in or around the Base Camp Zone to conduct business, including retail trade and mobile money services. Inter-marriage between refugees and host community members contributed to population expansion and blurred distinctions between refugee and non-refugee populations. While integration brought economic opportunities, it also intensified competition over resources such as land, fishing rights, and water. Negotiations between refugees and host communities temporarily alleviated tensions but ultimately increased demand on limited resources.

5.4.4. Limited Reproductive Health Services

Inadequate access to reproductive health services further contributed to unplanned pregnancies. Respondents reported infrequent outreach by NGOs and limited availability of contraception. Even when contraceptives were available, cultural beliefs and the perceived benefits of having children within the settlement discouraged their use.

5.4.5. Summary of Key Findings

The findings demonstrate that population growth in the Base Camp Zone of Nakivale is not primarily driven by new arrivals, but by internal dynamics shaped by hunger, aid structures, gendered survival strategies, sexual violence, and limited reproductive health services. Aid allocation based on household headcount plays a central role in shaping these dynamics, simultaneously alleviating short-term deprivation and intensifying long-term resource pressure.

6. Discussion of Findings

This chapter critically discusses the findings of the study on Aid Allocation by Household Headcount; Population Growth and Resource Pressure in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda. The discussion situates the empirical evidence within broader theoretical and empirical debates on population growth, humanitarian aid, dependency, gendered livelihoods, and resource scarcity in protracted refugee settings. Drawing on Malthusian population theory, dependency theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), the chapter demonstrates that population growth in Nakivale is not a passive demographic outcome but an adaptive, survival-oriented response to structural constraints embedded within humanitarian governance systems. The discussion proceeds by examining population growth and resource pressure, the role of aid allocation mechanisms, gendered survival strategies, sexual violence and insecurity, refugee–host relations, and institutional limitations. The chapter concludes by outlining the theoretical, empirical, and policy implications of the study.

6.1. Population Growth and Resource Pressure: Revisiting Malthus in a Humanitarian Context

Classical Malthusian theory posits that population growth tends to outstrip food production, leading to inevitable scarcity unless checked by moral restraint or natural calamities (Malthus, 1798). At face value, the findings from Nakivale appear to support this perspective: increasing household sizes intensify pressure on land, food supplies, water sources, and humanitarian infrastructure. Respondents consistently described declining access to cultivable land, reduced food rations, and heightened competition for basic services. However, the study complicates a simplistic Malthusian interpretation by revealing that population growth in Nakivale is not driven by natural fertility trends alone, but by institutional incentives linked to aid allocation. Refugees do not reproduce in ignorance of scarcity; rather, they make constrained, strategic decisions in response to hunger, uncertainty, and aid policies that tie survival to household size. This aligns with neo-Malthusian critiques that emphasize the role of political and institutional factors in shaping demographic outcomes (Myers, 2002). The study's findings resonate strongly with Sen's (1981) entitlement theory, which argues that famine and hunger result from failures in access rather than absolute shortages. In Nakivale, hunger persists despite the presence of humanitarian assistance, revealing a mismatch between population needs and resource distribution mechanisms. Thus, while population growth contributes to resource pressure, it is more accurately understood as a symptom of structural scarcity, not its root cause. The findings suggest that focusing solely on fertility reduction without addressing aid governance risks misdiagnosing the problem.

6.2. Aid Allocation by Household Headcount and the Production of Dependency

Dependency theory offers a powerful lens for understanding how humanitarian assistance structures shape refugee behaviour and long-term outcomes. Harrell-Bond (1986) argues that prolonged aid regimes often undermine self-reliance by positioning refugees as passive recipients rather than economic agents. The findings from Nakivale strongly support this critique. Aid allocation based on household headcount creates a perverse incentive structure in which larger households are perceived as more deserving of support. Refugees adapt rationally to this system by expanding household size through childbirth, polygamous unions, or informal household fragmentation. These strategies are not expressions of dependency culture but rational responses to an environment in which survival is contingent upon remaining visible and eligible within humanitarian databases. The study further reveals that opaque classification processes such as labelling households as “self-reliant” without meaningful income reinforce insecurity and mistrust. When assistance is removed unpredictably, households resort to survival strategies that deepen dependency in the long term, including transactional sex and early marriage. However, the findings also challenge deterministic interpretations of dependency theory. Evidence of informal trade, host-community integration, and agricultural adaptation demonstrates refugee agency and innovation. This supports Bakewell’s (2008) argument that refugees are active navigators of aid systems rather than passive victims. Dependency, in this context, emerges as a structural condition, not an inherent characteristic of refugees.

6.3. Gendered Livelihoods and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999) provides a comprehensive tool for analyzing how refugees mobilize assets under conditions of vulnerability. The findings demonstrate that access to livelihood capitals in Nakivale is profoundly gendered. Women, particularly those heading households, face severe constraints in accessing financial, physical, and social capital. Limited mobility, caregiving responsibilities, and exposure to violence restrict their participation in formal and informal markets. As a result, women rely heavily on human capital (labor, reproductive capacity) and social capital (relationships), often at significant personal risk. Transactional sex and survival-based relationships represent extreme manifestations of livelihood vulnerability, where women convert bodily autonomy into economic survival. These practices erode long-term livelihood sustainability by increasing exposure to violence, stigma, and health risks, thereby depleting human and social capital. The SLF also highlights the role of transforming structures and processes. In Nakivale, humanitarian agencies, security institutions, and health services systematically shape livelihood outcomes. Weak reproductive health services and inadequate security exacerbate vulnerability, while aid policies fail to account for intra-household gender dynamics. This institutional context explains why livelihood strategies often reproduce rather than resolve vulnerability.

6.4. Sexual Violence, Insecurity, and Demographic Outcomes

The study’s findings on sexual violence reveal a disturbing linkage between insecurity, hunger, and population growth. Sexual violence contributes directly to unplanned pregnancies and household formation, while also reinforcing gendered power imbalances.

These findings align with existing literature documenting the normalization of gender-based violence in protracted displacement settings (Horn et al., 2014; Freedman, 2016). The underreporting of rape, reliance on informal justice mechanisms, and flight of perpetrators reflect weak institutional protection. In this context, pregnancy resulting from rape often leads to forced or informal marriage, embedding violence-induced fertility into household structures. Population growth thus becomes an unintended demographic consequence of insecurity. Importantly, male respondents’ claims of false accusations whether accurate or not signal deep mistrust and contested gender relations. These narratives further discourage reporting and reinforce silence, perpetuating cycles of violence and vulnerability.

6.5. Hunger, Fertility, and Reproductive Decision-Making

One of the study’s most significant contributions lies in demonstrating how hunger directly shapes reproductive decision-making. Contrary to assumptions that food insecurity suppresses fertility, the findings show that hunger incentivizes childbirth when aid is linked to household size. This paradox challenges conventional demographic models and underscores the need for context-sensitive analysis. Limited access to reproductive health services further constrains choice. Even when contraceptives are available, the perceived benefits of having children access to aid, social recognition, relationship stability often outweigh concerns about long-term sustainability. This reinforces Caldwell’s (1982) wealth-flow theory, which suggests that children may be perceived as economic assets in contexts of insecurity.

6.6. Refugee–Host Relations and Resource Competition

Integration with host communities introduces both opportunity and pressure. The findings show that intermarriage and economic exchange contribute to population growth while intensifying competition over land, water, and fishing resources. These dynamics echo studies highlighting the dual nature of refugee–host interactions (Jacobsen, 2002). While integration enhances resilience for some households, it also shifts resource pressure beyond the settlement, raising questions about sustainability and equity. Without coordinated planning, such interactions risk generating tensions that undermine social cohesion.

6.7. Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

The study makes three key contributions to knowledge. First, it empirically demonstrates how aid allocation mechanisms shape demographic behaviour, an underexplored dimension of refugee governance. Second, it integrates population theory with livelihood and dependency frameworks, offering a multidimensional explanation of population growth in refugee settlements. Third, it foregrounds gender as a central analytical lens, revealing how women’s bodies become sites of survival under humanitarian scarcity.

6.8. Policy Implications

The findings suggest that humanitarian assistance should move beyond household headcount as a primary allocation criterion. Incorporating livelihood capacity, dependency ratios, and gendered vulnerability could reduce incentives for survival-driven fertility. Strengthening reproductive health services, improving security, and increasing transparency in aid classification are critical steps toward sustainable outcomes.

Therefore, population growth and resource pressure in Nakivale Refugee Settlement are deeply intertwined with humanitarian governance structures. Aid allocation systems, while lifesaving, inadvertently shape demographic behaviour and livelihood strategies. Addressing these challenges requires rethinking how assistance is designed, delivered, and evaluated in protracted displacement contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between aid allocation by household headcount, population growth, and resource pressure in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda. The findings demonstrate that population growth in the settlement cannot be understood as a purely demographic phenomenon, nor as a consequence of cultural preference or individual irresponsibility. Rather, it is a structurally produced outcome shaped by humanitarian governance, chronic scarcity, and constrained livelihood opportunities within a protracted displacement context. The study reveals that aid allocation mechanisms based on household size play a central role in shaping reproductive and household formation decisions. While intended to target vulnerability, headcount-based assistance inadvertently incentivizes household expansion as a survival strategy. Refugees respond rationally to these incentives in an environment marked by hunger, uncertainty, and limited economic opportunity. As a result, population growth emerges as an adaptive response to scarcity rather than its primary cause, challenging neo-Malthusian interpretations that attribute resource pressure to unchecked fertility alone. By engaging dependency theory, the study demonstrates how prolonged humanitarian assistance, when poorly aligned with livelihood realities, can entrench structural dependency without eliminating agency. Refugees in Nakivale actively navigate aid systems through informal economies, agricultural adaptation, and integration with host communities. However, these strategies remain fragile and uneven, particularly for women, whose livelihoods are shaped by gendered constraints and exposure to sexual violence. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework highlights how deficits in financial, physical, and social capital exacerbated by weak institutional protection force women into high-risk survival strategies that further contribute to unplanned population growth. The findings also underscore the critical role of insecurity and inadequate reproductive health services in shaping demographic outcomes. Sexual violence, transactional sex, and limited access to contraception link resource scarcity directly to household expansion, embedding demographic change within cycles of vulnerability and gender inequality. These dynamics are further intensified by refugee–host interactions that, while offering economic opportunity, increase competition over land and natural resources. The study contributes to refugee and development scholarship by empirically demonstrating how humanitarian aid structures influence demographic behavior in protracted settlements. It calls for a rethinking of aid allocation models that rely heavily on household headcount, advocating instead for more nuanced, transparent, and gender-sensitive approaches that prioritize sustainable livelihoods and protection. Without such reforms, humanitarian assistance risks perpetuating the very vulnerabilities it seeks to alleviate, reinforcing cycles of dependency, insecurity, and resource pressure in refugee settlements like Nakivale.

Ethical statement

Due to the sensitivity of the research, respondents above the age of eighteen were interviewed, and the study complied with ethical

research guidelines. Second, in order to gather information for the focus group discussions and the individual interviews, each respondent's consent was first obtained.

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