

Conflict, Displacement And Human Security In Uganda: A Secondary Analysis Of Nakivale And Oruchinga Refugee Settlements

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Abstract: Forced displacement has become one of the defining humanitarian and human-security challenges of the twenty-first century, with more than 120 million people displaced worldwide by the end of 2024 (UNHCR, 2025). Uganda hosts over 1.6 million refugees, making it Africa's largest refugee-hosting country, and its progressive settlement policy has drawn international recognition even as protracted displacement strains local resources and services. This article draws on a qualitative, desk-based secondary analysis of literature, institutional reports, and settlement dashboards published between 2018 and 2025 to examine how conflict-induced displacement shapes human security in Nakivale and Oruchinga Refugee Settlements, Isingiro District. Using the seven-pillar human security framework (UNDP, 2024) alongside Forced Migration Theory and Social Conflict Theory, the study finds that displacement has eroded economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security in both settlements, with effects more acute in the larger, older Nakivale settlement. Refugees and host communities face overlapping constraints in accessing water, health care, education, and livelihoods, and although humanitarian agencies, government institutions, and refugees themselves have adopted a range of coping and intervention strategies, these remain constrained by chronic underfunding and uneven implementation. The article concludes that Uganda's progressive refugee model requires stronger integration of human security considerations into national and district planning, sustained multi-year financing, and expanded livelihood and social-cohesion programming to secure durable outcomes for refugees and host populations alike.

Keywords: human security; forced displacement; refugees; Nakivale; Oruchinga; Uganda; host communities

1.0 Introduction

Forced displacement has reached unprecedented global levels, driven by armed conflict, political persecution, human rights violations, and climate-related crises. UNHCR (2025) reports that more than 120 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide by the end of 2024, a figure that continues to rise annually. Beyond the immediate act of flight, displacement generates multidimensional challenges spanning food security, health, livelihoods, education, and social cohesion, underscoring the relevance of the human security paradigm, which shifts attention from state-centric notions of security toward the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities (UNDP, 2024).

Africa hosts a disproportionate share of the world's displaced population. Protracted conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Sudan, and the Sahel have produced millions of refugees, while fragile governance and limited resources intensify vulnerability (Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC], 2025). East, Central, and West Africa together account for nearly one-third of the global displaced population (UNHCR, 2025), and the East Africa and Great Lakes region in particular is a displacement hotspot, drawing refugees from South Sudan, DRC, Somalia, Eritrea, and, more recently, Sudan.

Within this region, Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, hosting more than 1.6 million refugees by mid-2024 (UNHCR, 2025). Its open-door asylum policy—allocating land, granting freedom of movement, and integrating refugees into national health and education systems—has been praised internationally (UNHCR, 2025). Yet the scale of displacement has increased pressure on local infrastructure and resources, generating competition over land, water, and employment and producing human security challenges for refugees and host communities alike (NRC, 2025).

Two settlements in Isingiro District, southwestern Uganda, anchor this analysis. Nakivale Refugee Settlement, established in 1958 and among Africa's oldest, hosts refugees from more than ten nationalities and has evolved into a semi-permanent settlement with its own schools, health centres, and markets, yet continues to face water scarcity, inadequate health services, overcrowded schools, and limited livelihoods. Oruchinga Refugee Settlement, originally a 1950s transit centre, is smaller and hosts refugees mainly from Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda; it has been the site of targeted livelihood interventions, though constrained by limited scale and resources (UNHCR, 2022). Comparing a large, protracted settlement with a smaller, more specialised one offers insight into how settlement scale and resource allocation shape human security outcomes.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Forced displacement is widely recognised as one of the defining humanitarian and human security challenges of the twenty-first century, with over 120 million people displaced globally by conflict, persecution, and disaster (UNHCR, 2025). Africa, and particularly the East and Great Lakes region, continues to host a disproportionate share of the world's refugees, and Uganda stands out as the continent's largest refugee-hosting country. While Uganda is praised for progressive refugee policies—including land allocation and integration of refugees into national systems—the protracted nature of displacement places considerable strain on host communities, social services, and the environment (NRC, 2025).

Nakivale and Oruchinga have become epicentres of these tensions. Nakivale, as one of the oldest and largest settlements, hosts diverse populations with complex socio-economic needs (UN-Habitat, n.d.), while Oruchinga, though smaller, faces its own challenges of limited services, resource scarcity, and refugee–host relations (UNHCR, 2022). Both settlements continue to experience gaps in water supply, healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities that directly undermine the human security of refugees and neighbouring host communities. Despite Uganda's progressive policies, comparatively little empirical research has focused specifically on how these two settlements mediate the relationship between conflict-driven displacement and human security, constraining evidence-based policy and programming for refugee protection and sustainable coexistence. This study addresses that gap by examining (i) the impact of conflict-induced displacement on refugees' human security, (ii) the challenges refugees and host communities face in accessing basic services, and (iii) the strategies adopted by humanitarian agencies, government, and refugees themselves to address human security concerns in Nakivale and Oruchinga.

3.0 Methods and Materials

3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

The study was guided by a qualitative interpretivist paradigm informed by pragmatic considerations, treating human security as a socially constructed, context-specific concept whose meaning varies across settings and sources (Ebohon et al., 2020). Ontologically, the study assumed that realities surrounding conflict, displacement, and human security are multiple and complex, accessed through documented analyses and institutional narratives rather than direct field interaction. Epistemologically, knowledge was generated through systematic review, interpretation, and synthesis of existing sources rather than primary measurement or experimentation. A qualitative secondary research approach was adopted accordingly: the study relied exclusively on existing academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and published datasets, with no primary data collected (Creswell, 2014).

3.2 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive and analytical desk-based design, involving systematic review and analysis of secondary data to examine the relationship between conflict, displacement, and human security, with specific reference to Nakivale and Oruchinga. This design allowed the study to describe documented human security conditions and analytically compare how displacement dynamics affected different dimensions of human security across the two settlements.

3.3 Data Sources and Collection

Data were drawn entirely from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles; reports from international organisations such as UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, and the World Bank; Government of Uganda refugee response plans and policy documents; settlement-level dashboards for Nakivale and Oruchinga; and publications by non-governmental organisations and research institutions. Only sources published between 2018 and 2025 were considered, to ensure relevance and temporal consistency with the study scope. Documents were selected based on credibility, relevance to the study objectives, and direct focus on refugee displacement and human security in Uganda, and key information on conflict drivers, displacement patterns, service access, and human security outcomes was extracted from each source.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis and descriptive synthesis, proceeding in four stages: (i) documents were read and reviewed for familiarity; (ii) data were organised according to the seven pillars of the human security framework—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security; (iii) evidence from different sources was compared and synthesised to identify patterns, similarities, and differences between the two settlements; and (iv) findings were interpreted in relation to the study objectives and theoretical framework. The analysis relied on narrative explanation and thematic organisation rather than statistical techniques.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical considerations centred on the responsible use of secondary data: all sources were properly cited to avoid plagiarism, and care was taken to accurately represent original findings without distortion or selective reporting. As the study involved no human participants, issues of informed consent and confidentiality did not apply. As a secondary study, the research was limited by the availability and quality of existing data, which may not fully capture recent changes or local nuances within the settlements; triangulation of multiple credible sources was used to enhance reliability and robustness.

4.0 Results

4.1 Impact of Conflict-Induced Displacement on Human Security

Economic and food security. Refugees in both settlements arrived after fleeing violent conflict, often having lost productive assets, livelihoods, and savings. Although Uganda's settlement model allows limited access to land and work, land allocations were often small and insufficient for sustainable agricultural production, particularly in Nakivale because of population pressure. Food security was closely tied to economic insecurity, with refugees in both settlements remaining highly dependent on food rations and cash transfers; reductions in assistance, combined with inflation and market instability, were associated with increased food insecurity, especially among large and newly arrived households (UNHCR, 2022, 2024; UNDP, 2024; NRC, 2025).

Health and environmental security. Overcrowding, limited health infrastructure, and high service demand strained facilities in both settlements, with communicable disease, maternal health challenges, and trauma-linked mental health conditions widely reported. Environmental degradation—deforestation, soil degradation, and water scarcity—was more pronounced in Nakivale

because of its longer settlement history and larger population, though Oruchinga experienced similar pressures at a smaller scale, with knock-on effects for food production and resource competition.

Personal, community, and political security. Displacement exposed refugees to risks including gender-based violence, exploitation, and social tension. Uganda's legal framework provided protection and freedom of movement, but practical constraints limited refugees' exercise of political and civic rights. Host–refugee relations were generally peaceful in both settlements, though tensions around land, water, and services were more frequent in the larger and more diverse Nakivale, while Oruchinga exhibited relatively stronger social cohesion but fewer available services.

4.2 Challenges in Accessing Basic Services

Service delivery constraints affected refugees and host communities alike, reinforcing shared vulnerabilities and occasionally intensifying tensions. Water access was a critical challenge, with settlement infrastructure originally designed for emergency response struggling to meet the demands of protracted displacement; long distances to water points, intermittent supply, and maintenance problems were frequently reported. Health services were similarly overstretched, with shortages of medical personnel, medicines, and equipment, and refugees and host residents often sharing the same overcrowded facilities. Education services faced significant strain, particularly at primary level, with overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and limited secondary opportunities affecting both refugee and host children, contributing to rising dropout rates. Livelihood services remained limited relative to demand; while some vocational training and agricultural support existed, coverage was uneven and often short-term, and host community members expressed concern about perceived unequal access to assistance (UNHCR, 2022, 2024; UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2023; RSIS International, 2023).

4.3 Strategies to Address Human Security Concerns

Humanitarian agencies implemented cash assistance, WASH, health, education, and protection programming aimed at stabilising living conditions, with an increasing shift toward livelihoods and self-reliance initiatives, although coverage remained constrained by funding limitations. The Government of Uganda played a central role through its progressive refugee policy framework, integrating refugee needs into national and district development plans and coordinating government, UN, and donor inputs through the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan. Refugees themselves adopted coping strategies including informal trade, community savings groups, subsistence farming, and mutual support networks; agricultural cooperatives and skills training were relatively more visible in Oruchinga, while Nakivale exhibited more diverse informal economic activity linked to its size and market structures. Despite these efforts, self-reliance remained fragile and highly dependent on external support and an enabling policy environment (UNHCR, 2014; UNHCR & Government of Uganda, 2024; ODI, 2016; U-Learn, 2024).

5.0 Discussion of Results

The findings show that conflict-induced displacement has significantly undermined multiple dimensions of human security among refugees in Nakivale and Oruchinga, particularly economic, food, health, environmental, and community security. This suggests that displacement in protracted settlement contexts creates not only immediate humanitarian needs but entrenched, long-term vulnerabilities affecting refugees' ability to secure stable livelihoods, adequate health, and social wellbeing—consistent with UNHCR (2021) and Verme et al. (2021), who argue that prolonged displacement transforms short-term shocks into chronic human security challenges spanning livelihoods, health, and governance.

Regarding economic and food security, both settlements showed constrained livelihood opportunities and high dependency on humanitarian assistance, with more severe pressure in Nakivale owing to population size and land scarcity. This indicates that while Uganda's settlement model offers relative freedom and land access, structural limitations reduce refugees' capacity for sustainable self-reliance, particularly in older, larger settlements—aligning with Verme et al. (2021) and UNDP (2024) on asset loss, limited productive opportunity, and persistent food insecurity in rural settlement contexts.

Health and environmental security were adversely affected by overcrowding, overstretched services, and degradation, especially in Nakivale, pointing to a reinforcing feedback loop between environmental stress and human insecurity as settlements age and grow. This aligns with Cuadrado et al. (2023) and reporting on Nakivale's environmental pressures, which document heightened disease burden, mental health challenges, and degradation in long-standing settlements.

On personal, community, and political security, refugees faced protection risks, social tension, and limited political voice despite a relatively supportive legal framework, suggesting that formal policy protections alone are insufficient to guarantee everyday security when resources are scarce and services contested. This is consistent with Bjørkhaug (2020), who found that refugee insecurity in Nakivale stemmed not only from physical threats but from social exclusion and strained host–refugee relations.

On service access, refugees and host communities faced overlapping vulnerabilities in water, health, education, and livelihoods, with delivery systems operating beyond capacity—consistent with UNHCR (2022, 2024) on declining per-capita access to basic services in refugee-hosting districts. Water and health services were particularly strained, indicating that emergency-oriented infrastructure is inadequate for sustained displacement and requires long-term investment and integration into national systems, in line with World Bank (2023) and RSIS International (2023). Education and livelihood service gaps may similarly undermine long-term human capital development and social cohesion, echoing UNICEF (2023) and Verme et al. (2021).

Finally, while humanitarian agencies and the Government of Uganda have shifted from short-term relief toward more integrated approaches recognising the protracted nature of displacement (UNHCR, 2014; Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan, 2024), the effectiveness and sustainability of these interventions remain constrained by funding gaps, uneven coverage, and limited local

capacity, consistent with ICVA (2025) and Kohlenberger (2025) on chronic underfunding and fragmentation. Refugees' own coping strategies—informal trade, farming, and community networks—demonstrate meaningful agency in managing displacement-related risk, though these strategies remain fragile and dependent on external support, as reflected in Bjørkhaug (2020) and U-Learn (2024).

6.0 Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between conflict, displacement, and human security in Uganda, focusing on Nakivale and Oruchinga Refugee Settlements. Conflict-induced displacement has significantly undermined multiple dimensions of human security among refugees—particularly economic, food, health, environmental, and community security—with effects more severe in Nakivale because of population pressure and protracted settlement conditions. Refugees and host communities face shared and persistent challenges in accessing water, health care, education, and livelihood opportunities, reinforcing mutual vulnerabilities and occasionally intensifying social tensions. Although humanitarian agencies, government institutions, and refugees themselves have adopted various strategies to address human security concerns, the sustainability and effectiveness of these interventions remain constrained by limited resources, uneven implementation, and the prolonged nature of displacement.

7.0 Recommendations

The Government of Uganda should strengthen the integration of refugee and host community needs into national and district development plans by expanding investment in water, health, education, and environmental management in refugee-hosting areas, while ensuring host communities benefit equitably from refugee-related development to reduce competition and enhance social cohesion.

Humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR and partner organisations, should scale up sustainable livelihood and self-reliance programming that goes beyond short-term assistance, prioritising market-oriented skills training, access to productive assets, and longer-term funding models—particularly in highly congested settlements such as Nakivale.

Development partners and donors should increase predictable, multi-year financing for refugee responses to support the shift from emergency relief toward integrated humanitarian–development approaches, focusing on local service systems, environmental restoration, and livelihood diversification.

Refugee and host community leadership structures should strengthen community-based initiatives that promote peaceful coexistence, collective resource management, and local economic cooperation, with greater support for savings groups, cooperative farming, and dialogue platforms that reduce conflict over shared resources and improve grassroots resilience.

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