



A lifeline at risk: food assistance at a breaking point

Refugees in Uganda country report

2025 September



World Food
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Contents

Foreword	3
Acronyms	4
Key messages	5
Background	7
Uganda's refugee landscape in 2025	7
Acute food insecurity among refugees	7
Acute malnutrition among refugees	8
Rations for refugees have reach unprecedented lows	8
Reduction in the number of people assisted	9
The macroeconomic and humanitarian context	9
Stakeholder landscape	9
WFP operations	10

Funding situation	11
Development funding	11
Humanitarian funding	11
WFP funding	11
Implications of funding cuts	12
WFP, local partners and the broader humanitarian sector	12
Economy and development sectors	13
Food security and nutrition implications of the cuts	15
Impact on affected people beyond food security	16
Conclusions	21
Annex	22
Notes	23
Acknowledgements	24

Foreword

The global humanitarian landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by an unprecedented crisis in international funding. As major donors scale back their commitments, the ripple effects are being felt across the humanitarian system—threatening the ability of organizations like the World Food Programme (WFP) and its partners to deliver life-saving assistance to millions. In 2025 alone, WFP is facing a staggering 40 percent reduction in funding, with projections of USD 6.4 billion compared to USD 9.8 billion in 2024.

In response to this challenge, WFP initiated a study to examine the food security implications of the funding crisis. The first phase of the research revealed alarming projections: dramatic reductions in WFP's reach could severely undermine global food security. Building on these findings, the second phase focused on country-level realities—exploring how reduced foreign aid is reshaping humanitarian operations and affecting the lives of vulnerable populations. The study was conducted in five countries—Afghanistan, Haiti, Niger, South Sudan, and Uganda—each offering distinct political, economic, and social contexts that reflect the diverse settings in which these cuts are unfolding.

This in-country research explored the impacts of funding reductions through three key questions:

1. How does reduced Official Development Assistance (ODA) affect the economies of aid-dependent countries and specific government sectors?
2. How are funding shortfalls impacting WFP, local partners, and the broader humanitarian sector in their efforts to deliver assistance?
3. How are these cuts affecting—or expected to affect—people in need and their food security?

By combining rigorous quantitative analysis with rich qualitative insights, this study aims to provide compelling evidence to support global advocacy. The findings will inform strategic decision-making, guide operational adjustments, and ultimately contribute to safeguarding food security in a time of profound change.

Acronyms

ACRONYM	Acronym spelled out
AFOD	Alliance Forum for Development
AMN	Acute Malnutrition
CARI	Consolidated Approach for Reporting Indicators of Food Security
CAT 1	Category 1 (most vulnerable refugees receiving highest ration)
CAT 2	Category 2 (moderately vulnerable refugees receiving reduced ration)
CAT 3	Category 3 (refugees classified as least vulnerable)
CO	Country Office
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
CSP	Country Strategic Plan
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FCS	Food Consumption Score
FES	Food Expenditure Share

ACRONYM	Acronym spelled out
FEWS NET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FSNA	Food Security and Nutritional Assessment
GAM	Global Acute Malnutrition
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GFA	General Food Assistance
HINGO	Humanitarian INGO Forum (Uganda)
HQ	Headquarters
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IPE	Individual Profiling Exercise
KII	Key Informant Interview
LCS	Livelihood Coping Strategies
LEWIE	Local Economy-Wide Impact Evaluation
MT	Metric Tonnes

ACRONYM	Acronym spelled out
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PDM	Post-Distribution Monitoring
Q1	Quarter 1 (first quarter of the year)
Q2	Quarter 2 (second quarter of the year)
rCSI	Reduced Coping Strategies Index
RRP	Refugee Response Plan
SO	Strategic Outcome
UCRRP	Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan
UN	United Nations
UN80	UN80 Initiative

ACRONYM	Acronym spelled out
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USD	United States Dollar
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Key messages

Uganda hosts Africa's largest refugee population, with over 1.9 million individuals by July 2025, primarily from South Sudan and Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹ Limited access to livelihood options and arable land have left many refugees reliant on humanitarian aid for survival. In recent years, WFP has progressively reduced food rations to refugees across all 13 settlements due to funding constraints.

In 2025, the country's Refugee Response is severely under-funded largely due to the global decline in humanitarian funding. This report presents an analysis of the implications of funding cuts on the food and nutrition status of refugees in Uganda, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data collected between 2024 and 2025.



Funding gaps

Funding cuts have forced WFP and its partners in Uganda to drastically reduce support. By August 2025, Uganda's Country Refugee Response Plan (UCRRP) had received only 18 percent of its USD 968 million 2025 appeal. WFP's funding stood at USD 35 million in the first half of the year – far below the USD 169 million required for operational needs.



Severe reduction in food assistance for refugees

As of May 2025, the funding cuts forced WFP to reduce the number of refugee beneficiaries receiving food and livelihood assistance to 662 000, leaving almost 1 million who may still need support without assistance. Those still receiving support are surviving on historically low levels of aid. Rations for new arrivals were reduced from 100 percent to 60 percent by May, while some less vulnerable refugees received just 22 percent of the full ration, as part of WFP's prioritization. Nutrition programmes have shrunk from 15 to five settlements, and local NGOs are losing staff and capacity.



Deterioration in food security

Households receiving the highest ration cuts experienced an average 20 percent decrease in their food consumption score (FCS). Nutritional diversity has fallen with the intake of protein-rich foods plummeting: dairy consumption has nearly vanished, with a 96.3 percent reduction, protein sources like meat, fish and eggs fell by 35.6 percent and pulses intake fell by 17.8 percent. Over time, households are likely to move into more severe phases of acute food insecurity as they exhaust their coping strategies and gradually erode their resilience to future shocks. Without urgent intervention, the nutrition status of children and young mothers will worsen, with long-term consequences for children's growth, development and survival.



Economic ripple effects

Humanitarian organizations were once major economic drivers in Uganda's refugee-hosting regions. Cuts to aid have caused job losses, weakened cash flow, and closed businesses dependent on refugee and aid-worker spending. Local markets are shrinking, housing demand has declined, and informal labour wages are falling due to increased competition. The economic downturn is straining both refugees and host communities, intensifying urban migration and poverty. WFP research shows each dollar of aid previously generated over two dollars in local activity; reduced transfers are reversing these gains and undermining inclusive growth.



Rising tensions, protection risks and social strain

Beneficiaries excluded from assistance feel angry and abandoned, leading to low participation in community meetings. Food insecurity has amplified protection risks, including gender-based violence, child neglect, and domestic tensions. Families face disunity as parents migrate in search of food or abandon dependents, while children increasingly drop out of school to work, mine sand, or migrate to cities. Communities report theft, resentment, and mental distress, particularly among households cut off from aid. Hostility and distrust towards aid agencies are growing, with many refugees perceiving prioritization as unfair. These dynamics highlight how food insecurity is fuelling social fragmentation, weakening resilience, and undermining community cohesion.



Distress migration, and asset depletion

Deprived of assistance, many refugees are selling off personal assets such as livestock and household goods or using ration cards as collateral for loans. Others are relocating to urban centres or across borders in search of work or farmland, often under risky conditions. Some children have been trafficked or forced into prostitution, while families split as caregivers leave in search of sustenance. Such survival strategies are eroding household resilience, deepening poverty, and creating new risks of exploitation and displacement both within and beyond Uganda.



Resetting the humanitarian response

Without predictable multi-year funding and coordinated strategies, humanitarian actors risk fragmentation, declining programme quality, and long-term erosion of resilience across Uganda's refugee-hosting districts. However, amid crisis, aid actors see opportunities for innovation and collaboration. UN agencies and government partners are reassessing delivery models, cutting red tape, and strengthening joint programming. WFP and others are exploring hybrid approaches that balance urgent needs with long-term goals such as refugee self-reliance. The crisis underscores the need for predictable multi-year funding, stronger partnerships, and streamlined coordination platforms.

Background

Uganda’s refugee landscape in 2025

Uganda hosts the largest refugee population in Africa, with over 1.9 million refugees by July 2025, most of whom are from South Sudan (53 percent) and Democratic Republic of the Congo (33 percent). Women and children make up 78 percent of the total population.²

The inflow of refugees into Uganda continues unabated due to conflict in Central and East Africa. In the first six months of 2025, there were 70 000 new arrivals from Democratic Republic of the Congo, 21 300 from South Sudan, and 12 500 from Sudan.³

While a small percentage of refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda work in farming or fishing (<1 percent), they are largely reliant on humanitarian aid for their survival. Limited access to livelihood options, arable land, and reduced humanitarian funding have left many refugees food insecure and malnourished. Refugees continue to encounter bottlenecks in attempts to secure credit, especially from

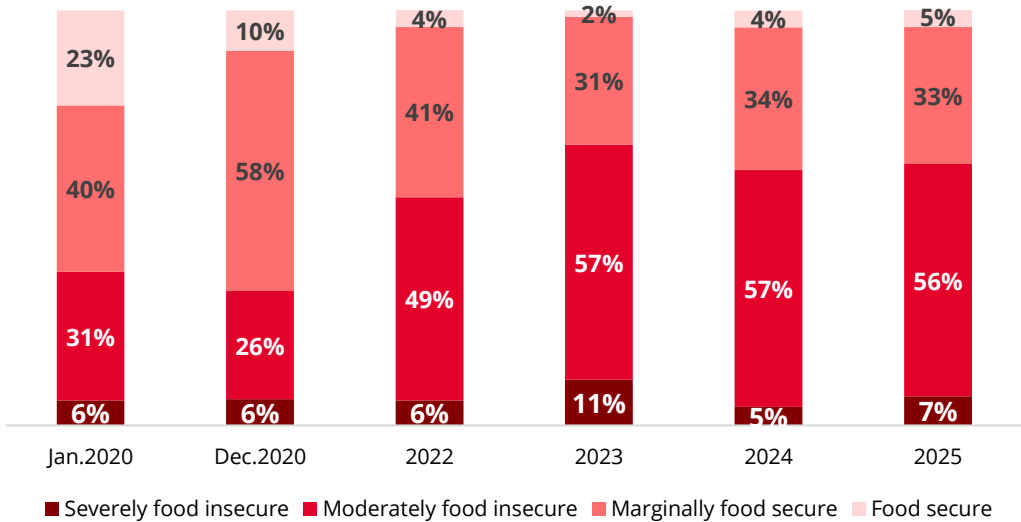
formal sources, due to weak socio-economic status, lack of conventional accepted collateral and slow data verification. Administrative barriers in facilitating access to work in the formal economy remain with challenges in accessing work permits. This creates an additional hurdle for refugees in the face of high unemployment rates in the host economy.

Progressive and sudden food ration cuts are resulting in increased pressure on household income sources and the scarce land available for agriculture production, potentially undoing years of gains accrued collectively by actors in livelihoods and economic inclusion programming.

Acute food insecurity among refugees

Between October 2024 and May 2025, most refugee settlements, particularly in the north, were projected to be in Crisis (IPC Phase 3). Though Kyaka II, Rwamwanja and Kyangwali in the southwest were projected to be in Stressed (IPC Phase 2), significant proportions of their populations

Figure 1 – Acute food insecurity of refugee population in Uganda, 2020–2025



Source: Food Security and Nutritional Assessments

were expected to face IPC Phase 3 (FEWS NET, October 2024).

According to the Food Security and Nutritional Assessment (FSNA), 63 percent of refugees are moderately or severely food insecure, 7 percent of them severely so, in 2025 (Consolidated Approach for Reporting Indicators of Food Security (CARI) methodology).⁴

In 2023 – the year in which 4 percent of refugees were first transitioned out from General Food Assistance (GFA) – 68 percent faced high levels of acute food insecurity. The percentage has remained above 50 percent since 2023. (See Figure 1)

Acute malnutrition among refugees

Global acute malnutrition (GAM) prevalence in refugee settlements such as Adjumani, Kiryandongo, Palorinya, Palabek and Kampala Urban ranged from 6.2–8 percent from April to September 2024, indicative of an Alert (IPC AMN Phase 2) situation.⁵

The 2024 Refugee Food Security and Nutrition Assessment (FSNA) confirmed similar GAM prevalence levels in refugee-hosting districts, categorizing the situation as IPC AMN Phase 2.⁶

Adjumani was projected to have the highest number of acutely malnourished children aged 6–59 months (5 000) from April 2024 to March 2025. Recent assessments show GAM prevalence in refugee settlements ranged from 6.8–8.9 percent in early 2025, still indicative of IPC AMN Phase 2. In some transit centres like Nyakabande, GAM prevalence among newly arrived refugees reached as high as 21.5 percent in 2024, indicating a Critical (IPC AMN Phase 4) situation.

Rations for refugees have reach unprecedented lows

Since April 2020, Uganda’s refugee population has faced multiple rounds of food ration reductions due to persistent funding shortfalls. Before 2020, refugees

received 100 percent of their food basket, either in cash or in-kind. However, by 2020, this had dropped to 70 percent, and by 2023, most refugees were receiving 60 percent or less of the standard ration.⁷

The situation deteriorated significantly throughout 2024 and 2025. In 2023, WFP began categorizing refugees into different vulnerability groups to manage limited resources more effectively.

New arrivals were granted full rations for their first three months, ensuring immediate support during their initial period of displacement.

Refugees classified in Category 1, considered the most vulnerable, received 60 percent of the standard food rations.

Those in Category 2, considered moderately vulnerable, experienced a sharp decline in support, with their rations dropping from 30 percent in February 2024 to just 22 percent by March 2025. The categorization also identified household not in need of assistance, categorizing them in Category 3. See Table 1.

The monthly cash assistance for some families fell from USD 53 to USD 38, and in some cases, was cut entirely. These are among the lowest rations that WFP provides in Africa.

Table 1. Changes in WFP GFA ration levels for refugees, 2020 to 2025

Year	Description	Ration level
2020	Reduction of ration for all refugees	from 100% to 70%
2021	Geographical prioritization to assign 3 different ration levels	70%, 60%, 40%, depending on geographical location
2022	Geographical and index-based ration levels for specific locations where data were verified using the Individual Profiling Exercise (IPE). The intention was to reach the 25% most vulnerable with the higher ration.	60% for population in selected settlements 60% or 40% for population with IPE completed, depending on location
2023 & 2024	Needs-based prioritization using an index-based approach.	100% for new arrivals for 3 months then to Category 1 for 3 months, then to Category 2 60% for Category 1 30% for Category 2 - No rations for Category 3
2025	Needs-based prioritization using a mixed approach: index-based and profiles	60% for new arrivals for 3 months then to Category 1 for 12 months 40% for Category 1 for 12 months 22% for Category 2 - No rations for Category 3

- Category 1 – Highest ration (60% in 2023/24 → 40% in 2025)
- Category 2 – Reduced ration (30% in 2023/24 → 22% in 2025)
- Category 3 – No rations provided

Reduction in the number of people assisted

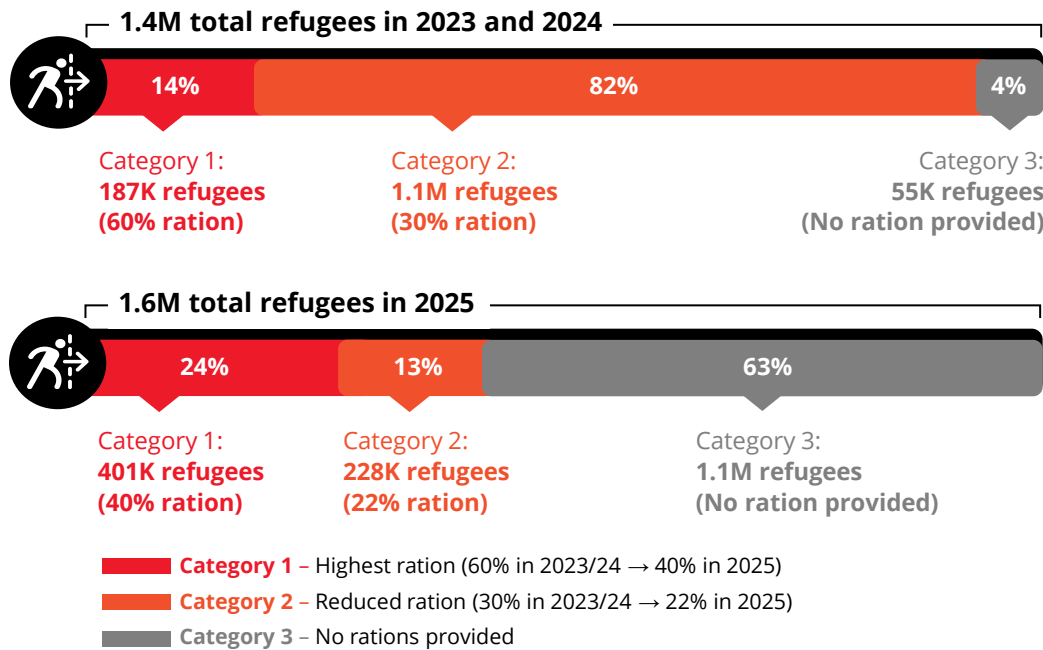
Persistent funding shortages have significantly hindered WFP's capacity to support the full population in need, particularly in the years 2023 and 2025.

In 2023, although the aim was to provide higher rations to the 25 percent of refugees identified as most vulnerable,

available resources only allowed WFP to reach 14 percent of these priority individuals with the maximum level of support.

In 2023, for the first time, some refugee populations no longer received any GFA. As a result, more than 55 000 refugees – approximately 4 percent of the affected population – were formally notified of these changes through extensive community consultations.

Figure 2. Changes in refugee HFA caseload by category, 2023–2025



As of May 2025, WFP had reduced its coverage from 1.6 million individuals to only 662 000, including new arrivals.⁸ In 2025, the population no longer receiving assistance was 18 times higher than in 2023 (See Figure 2).

The macroeconomic and humanitarian context

Although the country has experienced modest economic growth in the last few years, there remains limited fiscal space to enable adequate provision of social services to the general population, let alone the burgeoning refugee population. Deep cuts in humanitarian aid – especially food assistance for refugees – has strained vulnerable populations, potentially undermining long-term development gains.

Stakeholder landscape

Uganda’s humanitarian and development response is driven by a collaborative network of actors working across key sectors such as food security, nutrition, health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and social protection.⁹ At the core of this system is the Government’s Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) that leads coordination with all government

ministries, departments and agencies, working closely with UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and other local and international actors. WFP works in partnership with UN agencies, including UNICEF, FAO and WHO, and with a range of international and national NGOs, such as World Vision, CARE and the Uganda Red Cross. The multi-sectoral response system helps deliver integrated support to affected communities.

Community-based organizations play a vital role in reaching vulnerable populations, especially in remote and underserved areas. Their contributions are critical to ensuring that humanitarian assistance is locally grounded and responsive.

Coordination across this diverse landscape is facilitated through sector working groups and the Refugee Response Plan framework. These mechanisms promote alignment between humanitarian relief and long-term development goals, fostering a more coherent and sustainable approach to addressing Uganda’s complex challenges.¹⁰

The ongoing funding constraints have placed considerable strain on these organizations, which are essential for last-mile delivery and community-level engagement. They have reported

significant operational setbacks. Staff reductions, curtailed outreach, and disruptions in nutrition, protection and WASH services have become increasingly common. The absence of flexible, multi-year funding has further limited their ability to plan effectively or respond to evolving needs on the ground.

WFP operations

In 2024, WFP distributed 33 200 metric tonnes of food to refugees consisting of maize (22 400 MT), beans (5 200 MT) and corn-soya blend (5 600 MT), alongside smaller quantities of vegetable oil, rice and split peas.

In parallel, WFP significantly scaled up its cash-based assistance, disbursing USD 46.7 million to refugees. This shift toward cash transfers aimed to enhance operational efficiency and empower beneficiaries to make choices that best suited their needs. By the end of the year, 73 percent of assisted refugees were receiving assistance through cash, up from 61 percent in 2023. Moreover, 64 percent of cash recipients accessed their funds through digital channels, such as mobile money and agency banking, reflecting WFP's commitment to financial inclusion and market stimulation.

Women made up 56 percent of the total and an estimated 126 000 of beneficiaries had disabilities.¹¹

This integrated approach – combining food distributions, cash transfers and capacity building – enabled WFP to navigate a challenging operational landscape while continuing to support vulnerable populations across Uganda.

Capacity-building initiatives – including vocational training, financial literacy workshops, and support for small businesses – enabled refugees to pursue self-reliance and participate in local economies. By building skills and promoting income-generating activities, WFP fostered more sustainable outcomes and strengthened resilience in refugee communities¹², despite funding shortfalls.



Around **1.3M**
refugees served in 2024



33 200 metric tonnes
of food distributed



USD 46.7 million of
cash-based transfers



Funding situation

Development funding

Uganda’s development sector is shaped by a mix of government-led initiatives, international donors and NGOs, with key priorities including food security, nutrition, health and refugee support. Agriculture and nutrition, previously among the most-funded sectors, are facing funding reductions of up to 81 percent and 39 percent, respectively.¹³ The cuts, including to multi-year funding, have forced partners to shut down projects, close offices, and lay off 641 staff, including key technical experts. A UNHCR assessment in early 2025 revealed that around 511 900 people (416 800 refugees and 95 100 host community members) are missing vital livelihood support, a number expected to rise.

Uganda’s humanitarian and development community is adapting its national strategies, emphasizing resilience, local ownership, and integration of emergency response with long-term development. Government programmes, such as those under the WFP’s strategic plan, are being recalibrated to maintain essential services amid reduced external funding.¹⁴

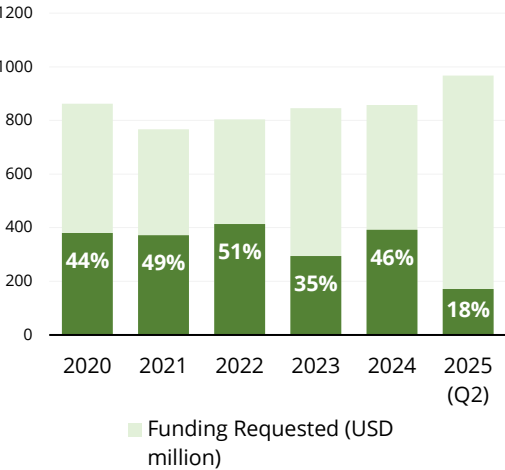
Humanitarian funding

As of Q2 2025, humanitarian operations in Uganda are only 18 percent funded, with a shortfall of over USD 796 million.¹⁵ Major donors still include the United States, European Union, Canada and Japan, though contributions are increasingly earmarked, limiting flexibility.

In 2020, only 44 percent of the USD 863 million requested in the country Refugee Response Plan (RRP) was received, a trend that persisted through 2021. Although funding slightly improved in 2022 (49 percent received of the USD 767 million required), it declined again in subsequent years. By 2024, the appeal stood at USD 858 million, yet only 46 percent was funded. As of Q2 2025, only 18 percent of the USD 968 million required has been funded. See figure 3.

Uganda’s funding gaps are particularly acute in sectors like protection, shelter and food assistance. The shift towards softly earmarked and unearmarked funding is limited, and donor fatigue is evident. This underfunding threatens the continuity of critical services, prompting calls for more predictable, multi-year

Figure 3 – Uganda Refugee Response Plan: requirement vs. received funding (2020-2025/Q1)



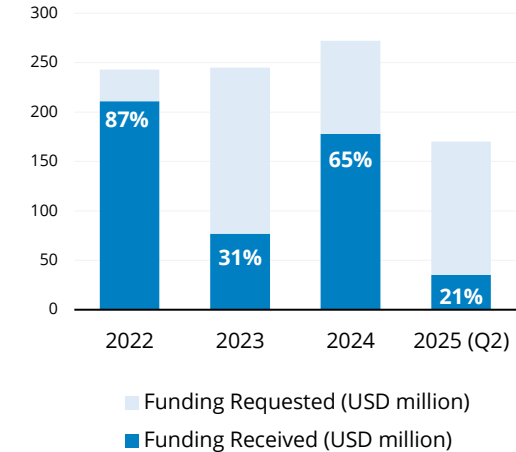
Source: UNHCR

financing and stronger alignment between humanitarian and development actors.

WFP funding

In the first half of 2025, WFP Uganda received approximately USD 35 million in contributions, a modest figure compared with the USD 169 million required for operations.¹⁶ Funding sources remain

Figure 4 – WFP funding requested vs. Funding received



Source: WFP

diverse but heavily reliant on traditional donors such as the United States, European Union, and Japan. However, earmarking remains high, limiting flexibility in fund allocation. The country office is pivoting towards integrated, multisectoral programming under its upcoming 2026–2030 strategic plan.¹⁷ The emphasis is on maximizing impact through targeted, systems-based interventions despite constrained resources.

Implications of funding cuts

Methodology

To assess the effects of reduced funding on food security and beyond, this study draws on desk research, quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews conducted in the field by expert WFP staff. More details in the methodology are given in annex.



WFP, local partners and the broader humanitarian sector

Funding cuts have forced NGOs to scale down or shut operations, particularly in nutrition, education, health and livelihoods. Local partners – critical to the localization agenda – are losing staff and capacity, undermining service delivery and long-term resilience efforts. Nutrition programmes have been reduced from 15 settlements to just five, and food rations have dropped below survival thresholds.

The collapse of complementary services – such as, agricultural support and maternal health – has eroded gains in human capital development. Local NGOs, often dependent on WFP sub-grants, are unable to retain skilled staff or maintain operations. This threatens the progress made in building community resilience and inclusive development. Without multi-year funding and strategic coordination, the sector risks fragmentation and long-term decline.

“We used to assist around 1.6 million refugees, but now we can only support about 662 000... We’re seeing increased suicide rates, trauma and rising malnutrition.”

WFP, Head of SO1 (Crisis Response)

“We’ve had to let some [staff] go or reassign them to roles that may not be the best fit. That affects programme quality and continuity.”

WFP, Head of food systems

WFP partners operating in various refugee-hosting districts and refugee settlements report a troubling increase in insecurity, theft and gender-based violence (GBV)-related issues. They are reporting a deepening crisis of economic desperation, manifesting in both social fragmentation and survival-driven behaviours.

The recategorization of assistance and reduction in support have triggered widespread dissatisfaction, particularly among vulnerable households that have been removed from assistance and who feel abandoned and misunderstood.

“... issues related to theft, looting, and abortion, are rising. It was reported .. that a group of youths was planning to loot a warehouse in one of the zones.”

**World Vision, Bidibidi settlement,
Yumbe district**

In Rwamwanja, World Vision Uganda observed that the changes have led to community disunity, with some refugees feeling inferior and wanting to leave the settlement. The scarcity of land has driven refugees to steal from host community

gardens, while the influx of unskilled labour stemming from households being removed from assistance has depressed wages, exacerbating poverty and competition among families.

In Bidibidi, World Vision’s food and cash assistance officer highlighted a rise in theft, looting, abortion and self-repatriation, with youth reportedly planning to loot warehouses – an alarming sign of desperation and breakdown in trust.

In Adjumani, the Alliance Forum for Development (AFOD) protection and gender officer noted a high prevalence of malnutrition, not just due to food scarcity but also parental neglect as caregivers abandon children in search of sustenance.

In Nakivale, Hunger Fighters Uganda described the chaos and emotional toll stemming from aid disruptions. Many vulnerable households were removed from assistance, leading to anger, confusion, and low engagement in community activities. The deprivation is palpable, with some households exhibiting alarming levels of hardship, and community meetings now marked by low attendance and hostility.



Economy and development sectors

The funding cuts have had a profound impact on local economies particularly in refugee-hosting districts and aid-dependent regions. Humanitarian organizations, once major economic drivers, are downsizing or shutting down, leading to job losses and reduced cash flow. Local markets are shrinking, and small businesses – especially those reliant on aid workers and refugee spending – are closing. The ripple effect is visible in housing, food supply chains, and informal labour sectors.

The economic downturn is also affecting host communities, who previously benefitted from refugee spending and

“INGOs are a major economic driver in Uganda... When their operations shrink, it doesn’t just affect service delivery, it affects the broader economy.”

HINGO Uganda, Director

aid-related employment. As refugees adopt negative coping strategies – such as selling assets or migrating to urban centres – the strain on urban infrastructure and social cohesion intensifies. Without renewed investment or alternative economic stimuli, Uganda risks deepening poverty and reversing development gains in vulnerable regions.

Officials from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) across various refugee settlements have described a deteriorating economic situation marked by scarcity, strained livelihoods, and broken support systems.

In Adjumani, the assistant settlement commandant noted that the lack of food



WFP/Amoné Okello

has led to widespread child neglect, school dropouts, and a rise in GBV – clear indicators of economic hardship affecting the most vulnerable.

In Rhino Camp, the economic pressure has driven many men to abandon their families, unable to fulfil their roles as providers. Reduced levels of assistance

“One of our mental health and psychosocial support partners has had their work doubled, as they are experiencing increasing suicidal cases.”

Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Rhino Camp settlement, Madi-Okollo district

“The cuts have disorganized our operations... we are left to fight with the after-effects of the categorization, like cases of suicide, child neglect, and domestic violence...”

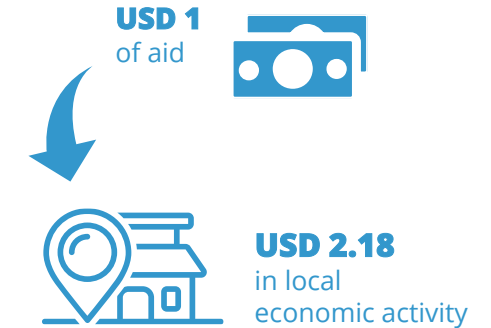
Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Bidibidi settlement, Yumbe district

have triggered theft and violence, with crime rates rising in the community and overwhelming local police.

In Rwamwanja, the changes in assistance have led to family separation and divorce, further destabilizing households. Caregivers, desperate to secure food, are neglecting their children in pursuit of farming opportunities, highlighting the trade-offs families are forced to make under economic strain.

The situation in Bidibidi is particularly complex. The acting settlement commandant explained how the cuts in aid have disrupted operations and fractured relationships between refugees and landlords. Previously, refugees would barter food for access to land, but with ration cuts, landlords have withdrawn their support, leaving refugees without land on which to farm food for consumption and/or sale. The block farmland provided by the OPM is often too distant or insecure, making it inaccessible. This has led to growing resentment towards the OPM, with refugees expressing their frustration through disengagement during meetings. The erosion of trust and authority reflects the depth of economic desperation and the breakdown of community cohesion.

The multiplier effect of cash transfers



A 2023 study by WFP using the LEWIE (Local Economy-Wide Impact Evaluation) model found that each USD 1 of humanitarian cash transfer generates up to USD 2.18 in local economic activity. This multiplier effect arises because recipients spend aid locally – on food, services and goods – stimulating demand and production in surrounding communities.¹⁸ Even non-recipient households benefit, as increased demand boosts employment and income opportunities across the local economy. This finding is particularly relevant in Uganda’s refugee-hosting districts, where humanitarian aid plays a vital role in both alleviating poverty and stimulating inclusive growth. The study warns that aid cuts can reverse these gains, reducing consumption, weakening local markets, and undermining resilience.

Food security and nutrition implications of the cuts

The analysis focuses on households that received the highest level of food assistance in 2024 but are now either receiving a reduced top-tier ration, have been reassigned to a lower ration category, or have been removed from assistance altogether. For clarity, we refer to households receiving the highest ration as Category 1 (CAT 1), those receiving the lower ration as Category 2 (CAT 2), and those no longer receiving assistance as Category 3 (CAT 3).

On average, households experienced a 20 percent reduction in their FCS,

equivalent to a decline of 6.3 points compared with pre-cut levels. Despite the relatively small sample size, this reduction was found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Refugee households that moved from Category 1 consistently show a decline in FCS, regardless of whether they were re-categorized to Category 2 or Category 3.

Households that remained in Category 1 experienced an average mean FCS decrease of 3.8 points, indicating a deterioration from the change of ration size in Category 1.

Those who transitioned to Category 2 saw a similar decline (-3.8 points),

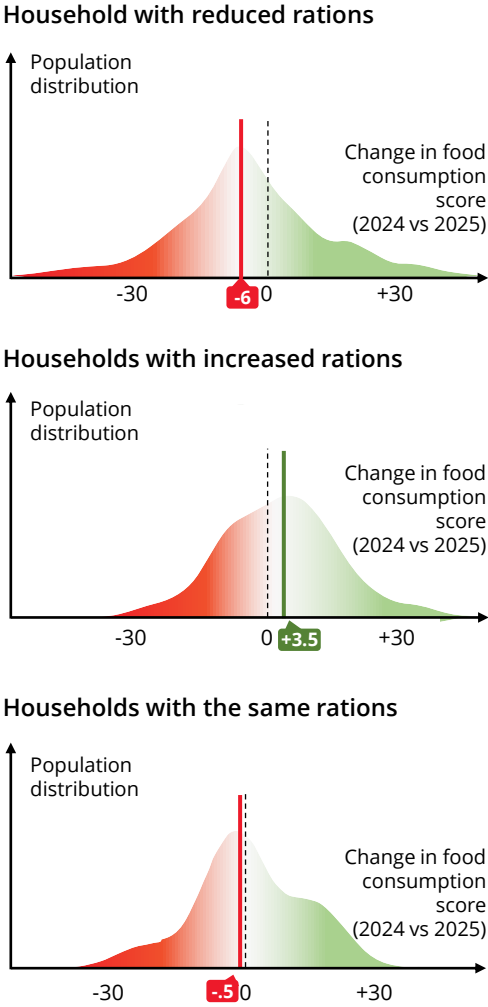
while households that moved from Category 1 to Category 3 experienced the most substantial drop (-6.5 points), highlighting the severe impact of complete removal from assistance.

Figure 5 presents changes in FCS across the three groups of refugee households. It visualizes the distribution of the changes in mean food consumption score values for each group:

- Reduced rations: these are households that used to receive the highest ration level (60 percent) and are now receiving either 40 percent or 22 percent rations or have been removed from assistance due to aid cuts,
- Increased rations: these are households that used to receive the lowest ration level but are now re-categorized and are receiving a higher or similar ration,
- Same rations: these are households that were not receiving assistance before and were not deemed vulnerable again

Households that experienced reduced rations show the most pronounced decline, showing a 6-point reduction in their mean FCS and a wide spread of negative values – as indicated by the large wings of the distribution plot, indicating substantial deterioration in food consumption.

Figure 5 – Food security change by ration status



Source: WFP

Table 2 - Average reduction in FCS after the cuts

Transition 2024 → 2025	Mean FCS in 2024	Mean FCS in 2025	Mean Change in FCS
CAT 1 → CAT 1 (60% in 2023/24 > 40% ration in 2025)	35.1	31.3	-3.8
CAT 1 → CAT 2 (60% in 2023/24 > 22% ration in 2025)	36.8	33.0	-3.8
CAT 1 → CAT 3 (60% in 2023/24 > no ration in 2025)	34.8	28.4	-6.5

Conversely, those with increased rations exhibit an increase in mean FCS by +3.5, reflecting improved food security and a distribution skewed towards positive outcomes. The households that maintained their ration category show a slight mean decline of 0.5, with relatively low variability.

The comparative analysis of food consumption across categories reveals significant shifts in dietary patterns. Households that remained in Category 1 notably increased their vegetable and fruit intake. However, sharp declines in pulses, protein and dairy consumption indicate reduced consumption of key nutrient-dense items, potentially impacting dietary quality. See Table 3.

Households that were recategorized as Category 2 showed a modest increase in pulses and vegetables, but a substantial drop in fruit) and fats. The decline in dairy and sugar consumption may reflect either reduced availability or changing consumption habits. Protein intake also decreased though less severely than in other transitions. See Table 3.

Households removed from assistance (Category 1 to Category 3) present the most dramatic reductions, particularly in fruits, dairy and proteins. While vegetable

Table 3 - Changes in the consumption of food groups

Category	Cereals	Pulses	Vegetables	Fruits	Proteins	Fats	Dairy	Sugar	Condiments
CAT 1 → CAT 1 (60% in 2023/24 > 40% ration in 2025)	-1.7%	-29.5%	41.5%	200%	-35%	18.9%	-100%	-50%	-8.6%
CAT 1 → CAT 2 (60% in 2023/24 > 22% ration in 2025)	-1.3%	1.2%	8.9%	-28.5%	-13.6%	-26.5%	-88.9%	-46.7%	-0.7%
CAT 1 → CAT 3 (60% in 2023/24 > no ration in 2025)	-4.4%	-25%	18.9%	-100%	-58.3%	-35.1%	-100%	-31.3%	2.9%

suggests a deterioration in dietary diversity and nutritional adequacy.

Additionally, although we see a general increase in the consumption of vegetables and fruits, these improvements in dietary quality do not suggest improved access or preference for fresh produce but rather the increase in gathering wild foods, such as wild fruits and leaves as reported by respondents during the FGDs.

These patterns may reflect worsening food security conditions or evolving coping strategies among households. Overall, the data highlight critical areas for nutrition, especially regarding protein and dairy consumption.



Impact on affected people beyond food security

This section synthesizes qualitative insights from refugee respondents. The findings are organized into five key thematic areas: gender-based violence, child labour, asset depletion, reasons for relocation, and community perception of WFP.

Intra-household tensions, community disunity and gender-based violence

In Adjumani district, respondents described how domestic violence has increased due to food insecurity. One participant noted that when children go to sleep hungry, mothers become aggressive and blame their husbands for not returning to South Sudan.

"My business money was stolen by unknown people. Meanwhile there are some women who were attacked and raped in the forest by unknown people."

**Woman from Adjumani settlement,
Adjumani district**

Others reported harassment from host community members while searching for wild vegetables. The community feels abandoned and discriminated against, especially those in category 3, who perceive themselves as equally vulnerable. The prioritization process has led to theft, resentment, and accusations of favouritism, with some believing that those who speak English are unfairly advantaged by aid organizations.

In Rhino Camp in Madi-Okollo district, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the categorization process, stating that it neglected vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled, and pregnant women. One respondent highlighted that gender-based violence has increased, particularly among women whose spouses have returned to South Sudan, leaving them unsupported. The community has experienced poor relationships, increased theft, and signs of mental distress among those in category 3.



WFP/Avete/Kibuka Mukisa

**Responsibility and
desperation – one boy's
story**

"I came with my mother from another settlement in Morobi because my father set our house on fire while we were sleeping. When we reached Zone 2 of Bidibidi, my father followed us, apologized, and for a while things seemed better. But after some time, he started beating my mother and me every day. People advised my mother to take him to prison, but she refused because in our culture a wife is not allowed to send her husband to prison.



WFP/Hugh Rutherford

The fighting continued until one day my father threw a stool at my mother, trying to kill her. She escaped and ran away, leaving us behind. After that, my father married another woman and abandoned me with two siblings –one from my aunt and another from my uncle –both separated from their families. We have no contact with them now. From then on, I had to take care of my siblings, and I stopped going to school.

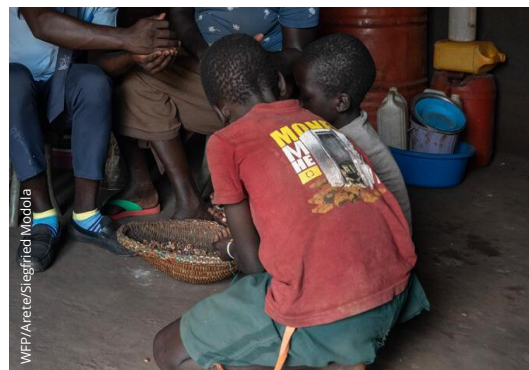
Life became so difficult that at one point we all decided we wanted to die. We started looking for rat poison, moving from house to house pretending that we needed it to kill rats, but in truth, our plan was to use it to kill ourselves."

Boy from Bidibidi settlement, Yumbe district

Child labour

In Nakivale in Isingiro district, participants reported that children are increasingly involved in labour activities such as sand mining and working in host communities. School dropout rates have risen as children are required to work and help in the household, and some children have resorted to theft. One breastfeeding mother with triplets shared that her 14-year-old son mines sand to support the family instead of attending school.

In Rhino Camp in Madi-Okollo district, respondents described how child-headed households rely on neighbours for food. When food runs out, children cry, and some parents leave home to avoid witnessing their suffering. The lack of resources has forced children to abandon education and engage in labour to survive.



In Rwamwanja in Kamwenge district, respondents noted that children have relocated to urban centres like Kampala and Mubende to seek employment, with some girls resorting to prostitution. The prioritization has excluded the most vulnerable, including children, leading to further marginalization.

"Our mother abandoned us two years ago and our father is a drunkard, so I had to take responsibility for the family and find work"

**Girl from Rwamwanja settlement,
Kamwenge district**

"Our mother went away with the ration card ..so we do not get any assistance and we do not know which category we are in. I depend on casual work, like selling of plastic and metallic scraps, also making handicrafts like small chairs for sale."

**Boy from Bidibidi settlement,
Yumbe district**

Asset depletion

In Nakivale in Isingiro district, respondents described selling personal belongings, such as clothes and cookpots, to obtain food. Some use their ration cards as collateral for loans. The community has resorted to eating one meal a day and begging from neighbours.

In Bidibidi in Yumbe district, participants reported engaging in casual labour, burning charcoal, and hiring land for cultivation to cope with food shortages. The recategorization has led to suicides and psychological distress, with families dividing and individuals feeling isolated.

In Rwamwanja, respondents mentioned working in host community farms, and relying on church donations.

"I left my saving group because I have no money to save, and I cannot borrow money for fear of being arrested and harassed when I fail to pay back."

Woman from Rwamwanja settlement, Kamwenge district

"I'm forced to sell my assets like goats, chickens and bedsheets."

**Man from Bidibidi settlement,
Yumbe district**

Forced relocation

In Nakivale in Isingiro district, many refugees are relocating to urban centres and host communities to find casual labour. Some are moving to Kenya or to cities like Mbarara and Kampala. Girls are often trafficked for prostitution through unclear channels. Others are returning to their home countries, believing it is better to suffer there than in Uganda.

In Rhino Camp in Madi-Okollo district, respondents cited poor agricultural conditions, lack of education, and hunger as reasons for relocation. Some are moving to live with relatives or other settlements for support, while others are seeking better opportunities in towns like Arua and Koboko.

In Bidibidi, many refugees are relocating to border areas of Kenya such as Busia, Merwa and Mijale to find fertile land for farming. Some are returning to South Sudan but face dire conditions, leading to further displacement or suicide.



Community perception of WFP

In Nakivale in Isingiro district, respondents expressed that the cuts to food aid have caused unequal relationships, disrupted social cohesion, and increased poor discipline among children. The community feels that vulnerable groups have been excluded, and there is widespread dissatisfaction with the aid community.

In Rwamwanja in Kamwenge district, participants noted that beneficiaries do not understand the reasoning behind these ration cuts, leading to trauma and disunity. Some refugees have shown compassion by sharing food, while others have joined farmer groups to cope.

In Adjumani district, respondents described how the prioritization has created divisions within the community. Those not receiving assistance feel neglected and poorly treated by their neighbours. The process has led to misunderstandings and resentment.

"Organizations supporting food assistance should avoid discriminating among beneficiaries but rather reduce rations so that everyone gets a share."

**Man from Rwamwanja settlement,
Kamwenge district**

Opportunities

While the recent budget cuts have imposed significant constraints on WFP, forcing the organization to make difficult decisions, they have also served as a catalyst for innovation. These challenges have tested WFP's and UN partner agencies' ability to adapt to a shifting operational landscape – prompting them to find alternative and more effective ways to deliver assistance, improve targeting, enhance implementation, and strengthen monitoring systems. Importantly, this moment presents opportunities to deepen synergies not only among humanitarian actors but also across sectors.

The broader humanitarian reset discussions have also pushed us to reflect and streamline our operations, cutting through red tape and accelerating collaboration. [...]

**UNHCR Uganda deputy
representative**

"I see this as an opportunity. It pushed us to reflect on more agile ways of delivering our programmes together. What's encouraging is that we're now starting to look more seriously at stronger collaboration with external actors."

**UNICEF Uganda deputy
representative**

As WFP Uganda country director Lauren Landis emphasized, "We need to make a clear shift. It doesn't mean abandoning refugees – it means thinking about them differently." This shift involves leading with long-term goals, such as fostering self-reliance among refugee populations, while continuing to meet urgent needs. WFP's hybrid structure enables it to do both, but doing so requires greater intentionality.

“One opportunity I see–despite all the challenges–is that we can actually do better together. But that requires moving away from blame. When funding is tight, there’s often a tendency to point fingers: “coordination is weak,” “structures are duplicative,” [...] There is an urgent need for the UN and NGOS to take a hard look at these coordination platforms, interagency meetings, and working group structures and streamline them. Identify where there’s duplication, where efficiency is being lost, and come to us – Government – with clear recommendations”

Director of Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), Office of the Prime Minister

On the ground, organizations are increasingly leaning into collaboration, recognizing that shared decision-making fosters consultation, learning and efficiency. With reduced staffing, WFP has had to rely more on shared agreements – an approach that not only sustains operations but also strengthens collective impact.

Judith Agaba, head of Isingiro field office, pointed out that cost efficiency measures should encourage WFP to protect its operational effectiveness, prioritize being close to the people it serves, and engage not only with local organizations, but with the local government and community volunteers, to ensure a clear pathway to sustainability.

Despite the many challenges, one opportunity that emerges is the potential to achieve better outcomes through collaboration.

With the current Country Strategic Plan (CSP) ending, WFP Uganda has a valuable opportunity to evaluate and improve its approach.

Genuine community engagement is essential to ensure that those we serve help shape new strategies, maximize resources, and adapt effectively to change.



Conclusions

The findings presented in this report underscore the profound and multifaceted consequences of funding cuts in Uganda's refugee-hosting districts. The reduction in food assistance has not only strained WFP's operational capacity but also disrupted the broader humanitarian ecosystem, weakening coordination, trust, and service delivery across sectors. The recategorization of beneficiaries – while necessary under constrained resources, and despite a concerted communications drive – has led to significant confusion, resentment and social fragmentation.

The economic ripple effects of these cuts are equally concerning. As humanitarian cash transfers decline, local economies lose a critical source of demand, undermining livelihoods and market stability. Government sectors, particularly health, education and agriculture, are struggling to absorb the shock, and the erosion of community resilience threatens to undo years of development progress. Mental health challenges, family breakdowns, and rising crime rates are symptomatic of a deeper crisis of survival and dignity.

Food security indicators paint a stark picture. The statistically significant drop in FCS among affected households reveals a deterioration in dietary diversity and adequacy, with the most severe declines observed among those removed from assistance. Qualitative data reveal evidence of child labour, gender-based violence, asset depletion, and forced relocation. These are not isolated incidents, but systemic outcomes of a humanitarian response stretched beyond its limits.

The community's perception of WFP and its partners has also shifted. While many still recognize the value of assistance and the work done by WFP, UNHCR and the OPM, inequities have eroded trust. Refugees feel abandoned, misunderstood, and excluded from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. This sentiment is particularly strong among those in Category 3, who view themselves as equally vulnerable but unfairly left behind.

Considering these findings, urgent action is required. First, there must be a renewed push for resource mobilization,



both from traditional donors and emerging partners. Predictable, multi-year funding is essential to restore assistance levels and rebuild community trust. Second, integrated programming that bridges humanitarian relief and development goals must be scaled up, with a focus on resilience, livelihoods and social protection.

The current funding crisis has exposed systemic vulnerabilities, but it has also sparked a humanitarian reset – prompting agencies to cut through red tape, streamline coordination, and embrace more agile, inclusive approaches.

As UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP leaders have emphasized, this moment demands deeper collaboration – not only among UN entities, but with government, local actors and development partners. As the United Nations commemorates its 80th anniversary, the UN80 Initiative calls for a more responsive and accountable system, and Uganda offers a compelling test case.

By reimagining aid delivery through the lens of equity, localization and long-term resilience, the humanitarian community can honour the UN's founding principles and chart a more sustainable path forward.

Annex

Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach used to assess the effects of reduced funding on food security outcomes, WFP operations and the general economy. The analysis utilizes a mixed methods approach where quantitative data are supported and triangulated with qualitative interviews conducted in the field by expert WFP staff.

Qualitative analysis

This analysis draws on qualitative data from focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and in-depth household interviews with different refugee groups. A keyword analysis identified recurring themes around coping strategies, perceptions of assistance withdrawal, and community-level impacts. The qualitative analysis included 15 FGDs conducted across five different settlements. Of these, six were held with women-only groups, five with men-only groups, and four with diverse participants identified as having specific needs. In total, 134 refugees participated in the FGDs, with an average of nine individuals per FGD.

Complementing these discussions, 16 in-depth interviews were carried out with refugees, including six with child-headed households, five beneficiaries of the self-reliance model, and four with long-term residents who had lived in the settlements for over seven years. Additionally, 27 KIIs were conducted with stakeholders, across WFP employees, government employees and partner INGOs.

This method enabled the capture of nuanced, context-specific insights that quantitative data may overlook. However, a key limitation is that qualitative findings can reflect subjective perspectives and are vulnerable to interviewer bias. Despite this, the approach provides valuable depth into the lived experiences of affected populations.

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative component of this analysis is grounded in a panel study of households interviewed during two distinct post-distribution monitoring (PDM) rounds: one conducted in September 2024, and the most recent round carried out between June and July 2025. Due to funding constraints, the country office was unable to maintain the same panel sample in 2025. Nevertheless, a subset of 294 households was successfully tracked across both rounds, providing a consistent basis for longitudinal analysis.

This study focuses specifically on households directly affected by recent changes in funding. In early 2025, the Uganda CO revised its prioritization scorecard, resulting in a significant reduction of the caseload to 662,000 refugees. The analysis centres on those who were previously classified as Most Vulnerable (Category 1) in 2024 and received the highest level of food assistance. These households have since been reclassified either as Least Vulnerable (Category 3), thereby removed from assistance altogether, or as Moderately Vulnerable (Category 2), now receiving the lowest ration.

The primary indicator used to assess the impact of these changes is the Food Consumption Score (FCS), which serves as a proxy for household food security. By comparing FCS outcomes across the two rounds, the analysis aims to quantify the effect of assistance cuts on dietary diversity and consumption adequacy. Particular attention is given to the differential impact between households that lost all assistance and those that experienced a reduction in ration levels.

Notes

- 1 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga=>
- 2 <https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/uganda>
- 3 <https://uganda.un.org/en/300098-humanitarian-workers-providing-lifeline-refugees-uganda>
- 4 CARI is a harmonized WFP methodology used to analyze and classify households using individual level food security indicators into different levels of food security groupings (Food Secure, Moderately Food Secure, Marginally Food Insecure and Severely Food Insecure). It can also be used to carry out vulnerability profiling of households to identify targeting criteria for programming. The indicators include FCS (food consumption score), rCSI (reduced coping strategy index), LCS (livelihood coping strategies), and either the FES (food expenditure share) or the ECMEN (economic capacity to meet essential needs) all measured at the household level.
- 5 https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Uganda_Acute_Food%20_Insecurity_Acute_Malnutrition_Jul2024_June2025_Report.pdf
- 6 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/117583>
- 7 <https://www.wfp.org/news/refugees-escaping-sudan-face-escalating-hunger-and-malnutrition-food-aid-risks-major>
- 8 <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/uganda-angola-africas-refugees-face-soaring-hunger-shrinking-aid-world-food-programme>
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 https://www.wfp.org/operations/annual-country-report?operation_id=UG01&year=2024#/33654
- 12 <https://uganda.un.org/en/271695-building-resilience-refugee-self-reliance-model-uganda#:~:text=With%20funding%20for%20refugee%20programmes,I%20made%20100%2C000%20Uganda%20shillings.>
- 13 https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC142455/JRC142455_01.pdf
- 14 <https://www.wfp.org/operations/ug01-uganda-country-strategic-plan-2018-2025>
- 15 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>
- 16 <https://dots.wfp.org/workspace/carbon/ri.carbon.main.workspace.88f86cc5-37a0-49e9-b3e4-c77dca3298e0/ri.workshop.main.module.30b3c926-9858-4e3e-beb7-44de1051d2f4>
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 <https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1504010397.Economic-Impact-of-Refugee-Settlements-in-Uganda-1.pdf>

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