

Northern Uganda Resilience Initiative (NURI)

DEVELOPMENT WORK IN REFUGEE HOSTING AREAS – NORTHERN UGANDA:

Lessons in operation and implementation



Refugee farmer group sharing their proceeds

Northern Uganda Resilience Initiative (NURI) was a four-year programme (2019-2022) financed by Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Uganda Country Programme. A one-year extension in 2023 enabled piloted additional activities, focusing primarily on greening and sustainability.

NURI aimed to enhance the resilience and equitable economic development of refugees and refugee-hosting communities in Northern Uganda.

NURI was implemented in thirteen districts in Northern Uganda and focused on three themes: Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), Rural Infrastructure (RI), and Water Resources Management (WRM). Approximately 30% of its activities were in refugee-hosting areas. It thus provided a nexus of humanitarian and development support. Activities in support of agriculture focused on improving farmers' knowledge of climate-smart production methods, as well as their understanding of, and ability to engage with markets and services. The settlements selected were Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement in Madi-Okollo and Terego Districts, Imvepi in Terego District, Palorinya Refugee Settlement in Obongi District, , and several smaller settlements in Adjumani, and Palabek Refugee Settlement in Lamwo District.

The achievements, challenges and lessons of NURI -- gathered from implementing partners' reports, external assessments, and learning and reflection workshops -- contributed to knowledge and learning during the implementation of the NURI program - traditionally falling under the development realm in refugee hosting areas of Northern Uganda. This note aims to highlight lessons of interest to other development and/or humanitarian actors, including District Local Government (DLGs,) UNHCR, implementing partners like the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), operational partners like World Vision, GIZ, Food for the Hungry etc, implementing, or planning to implement programmes in the refugee settlements. Detailed reports are available on www.nuri.ag.

NURI would like to express its sincere appreciation to the Office of the Prime Minister, UN Agencies such as UNHCR and WFP, as well as other partners, including Danish Church Aid and PALM Consult, for their significant and valuable contribution to the learning process on development work in refugee hosting areas of Northern Uganda.

NURI IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH OF WORKING IN REFUGEE CONTEXT

About 30% of the NURI programme targeted refugee households in support of Uganda's progressive refugee policy and to enhance the humanitarian-development nexus. In NURI operational areas, refugees are hosted on customary land offered by the natives through the Office of the Prime Minister, demarcated to every registered refugee household primarily for settlement purposes and backyard food production. Capitalizing on informal inter-nationality relations, NURI aimed to promote peaceful co-existence by encouraging mixed groups of refugees and host communities while simultaneously supporting purely refugee groups where the former was not feasible. This was anticipated to enhance refugee households' access to arable land for production beyond the 30m x 30m residential plots allocated for their settlement by the OPM.

The program targeted small-scale farmers, including refugees and the host communities in Northern Uganda. NURI program aimed at supporting farmers in groups and/or farmers willing to form groups and learn Climate Smart Agriculture. This led to the utilization of a set criterion in the selection and or formation of beneficiary groups.

a) Farmer group formation/ selection

The selection aimed at identifying suitable and interested farmers, whose livelihoods could be improved through learning and sustainably adopting the technologies introduced by the NURI program. Factors considered were members not supported in agricultural livelihoods at the time, one member per household and proximity to the settlements for the case of nationals. The groups were categorised into two with a membership of 25-30 as described below with support being provided for two years:

Mixed Group:

This comprised refugees and nationals who came together to form a farmer group. The proportion of refugees and nationals was flexible as it depended on their proximity, which varied from settlement to settlement. The formation of mixed groups was to ease access to land for refugees and promote peaceful coexistence.

Women refugee Group:

This targeted female-headed or female-represented refugee households. It focused on homestead food production and nutrition, including access to high-yielding crop varieties. In rare cases, males were admitted to such groups i.e. in Adjumani and Palorinya settlements.

Participation of the youth was integrated; they had liberty to join either of the above-mentioned categories. This decision was informed by a pilot conducted previously which targeted the youth groups.

b) Enterprise selection

After selecting/forming farmer groups and taking them through farmer institutional development (FID), these groups were expected to decide on their preferred type of enterprise and training based on the "Toolkit for CSA farmer groups" which includes the recommended CSA practices and technologies.

The mixed refugee/host farmer groups selected two crops, typically a 'food and sauce' combination (e.g., maize and groundnuts) from a list of field crops which included groundnuts, pigeon peas, beans, cassava, maize, sesame and sweet potatoes. The choice of crops was determined by two criteria, namely: access to land for production and crops grown for food security and income. On the other hand, refugee women groups had assorted vegetables, one root/tuber crop and fruit trees. The aim was food security and nutrition. Because of the vulnerability of the refugees, small quantities of seeds were given to each member of the group types mentioned above.

c) Extension services

NURI's extension priorities and approaches worked through recognised farmer groups, capacity building rather than input supply, and positioned extension staff close to the farmers for easy access and timely response to farmers' needs. NURI, through its implementing partners, deployed one Agriculture Extension Officer (AEO) to 12 groups and trained them for 2 years. The training was based on the enterprises each group selected and involved a set of demonstrations for mixed groups and refugee women, from selected farmer plots.

Resilience Design in Climate Smart Agriculture Training



CSA training aimed to build the capacity of farmers to increase crop production using improved practices, technologies and resilient structures, thus gaining resilience to climate change-related shocks.

These trainings focused on CSA technologies and practices such as intercropping, timely land preparation, use of drought-tolerant fast-maturing and pest/disease resistant varieties, soil and water conservation, line planting etc, and post-harvest handling and marketing of selected strategic crops.

CSA knowledge was provided to farmers by Agriculture Extension Officers (AEOs) whose recruitment was based on their crop science background (minimum qualification was a Diploma). The farmers were further trained on CSA, collective marketing, VSLA and financial literacy with support from NURI-CF and strategic partners like National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO). They interfaced directly with smallholder farmers through farmer groups using the demonstration gardens approach for direct learning, particularly for crop-specific sessions. Each AEO was responsible for up to twelve farmer groups. The Agricultural Extension Supervisors (AES) and NURI staff did another layer of supervision, with each supervising 8 – 12 AEOs. The extension staff received relevant CSA training from NARO and Makerere University scientists.

Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) training



VSLA was an integral part of the CSA approach and was designed to provide access to affordable financial services and literacy to the groups for investment in production and household development. The VSLA training was conducted by Community-Based Trainers (CBTs) who were recruited on contract basis from within the refugee settlements / communities for a period of thirteen months. Each CBT was responsible for eight VSLA groups that ran a cycle of one year and each VSLA Officer (VO) supervised twelve CBTs. Each unit with more than one VO had a VS responsible for overseeing VSLA activities in the unit/IP.

In the methodology, groups accumulated their own savings without any seed capital and lent to members at a rate of 10% per month for various purposes, including agriculture, business, and household development for a period of three months.

d) Implementation of Rural Infrastructure (RI) and Water Resource Management (WRM) using Cash for Work

RI and WRM activities were selected from within Parish Development plans and implemented by farmer groups formed within project sites, through cash for work approach. They were also implemented in refugee areas targeting both refugees and nationals for the different projects.

This was meant to create employment and ultimately, income generation for households but also create infrastructure that support agriculture and tree planting.

e) Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) training

The NURI programme was complemented by the Women, Adolescents and Youth (WAY) programme funded by Danida and implemented by UNFPA through CARE. WAY programme focused on SRHR mainstreaming in farming communities for healthy and peaceful productive labour in smallholder farming households. It focused on bringing harmony to households and the community at large through collective roles in both production and reproduction - Gender Based Violence (GBV) and excessive childbearing were recognized to affect agricultural production, leading to low income at household level. The NURI programme thus provided SRHR services such as training in child spacing, gender roles, etc in farmer groups to sustain agricultural production activities at household and farmer group levels. NURI extension staff integrated SRHR in their trainings by providing information aimed at creating demand. The extension staff trained farmer groups on some basic concepts and linked them to specialised persons e.g. family planning services for training and or services.

Coordination and collaborations



The NURI program collaborated with key stakeholders namely District Local Governments (DLGs), Lower Local Governments (LLGs), Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), UNHCR, WFP, Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), Danish Church Aid (DCA), Welthungerhilfe, ZOA, NARO, ZARDI's among other partners in the districts of operations. This ensured ownership of NURI interventions by local authorities while for the partners, it supported proper targeting of beneficiaries. There were minimal cases of duplication reported because of proper coordination. OPM/UNHCR took the lead in allocating operational areas of partners in the settlements and NURI enjoyed good collaboration. Good coordination and collaboration resulted in the close relationship and involvement of DLGs and LLGs in the implementation of NURI activities such as assessment and selection of farmer groups, recruitment of unit staff, selection of strategic crops, inspection of inputs procured for quality assurance, and field monitoring. These collaborations helped to minimize resource duplication, foster learning, ensure programme accountability, improving NURI programme outcomes.



Vegetable garden in the refugee settlement



Refugee farmer group sharing their proceeds

General recommendations

- Although the use of community-based structures can be effective in recruiting extension staff at a reduced cost, they need much more capacity building than technical staff would require, coupled with backstopping by technical staff for better quality of extension services.
- With the continuous evolution of research and innovations to address ever-changing production challenges, refresher trainings on recent technologies and products are essential for extension staff for their services to remain relevant.
- Continuously consult operational priorities enshrined within strategic development frameworks to align interventions for more relevance and cost efficiency. NURI objectives and targets were appropriately aligned to national and operational priorities which partly contributed to high impact.
- Where refugees and hosts are mixed, the dynamics of refugee life e.g., food distribution days and fluctuating numbers, need to be considered.

Lessons learned

Program design lessons



Selection of fruit tree seedlings is based on maturity period:

Refugees will always prefer quick maturing fruit trees as evidenced by the variety of seedlings selected. This helps to supplement their livelihoods in the shortest possible time. Some refugees also prefer transporting the fruit tree seedlings for transplanting in their home countries such as South Sudan.



Recruit local communities into extension structures:

Involving local communities, including refugees into the workforce as Trainers of Trainers (ToTs) facilitates easy interaction and commitment from the beneficiaries. It builds trust and helps address language barriers and translation challenges. It also improves the contact hours between the beneficiaries and the trainers.



Integration of refugees and host communities:

When refugees and host communities are integrated, they develop relationships and peaceful coexistence that leads to improved access to land at no, or relatively lower costs for the refugees.



Invest in simple but beneficial infrastructural:

Investing in infrastructures that benefit both the local communities and the refugees, e.g., markets and community access roads close to refugee settlements gives opportunities for income generation and strengthens interaction between refugees and hosts. These infrastructures are adequately utilized, maintained, and sustained.

CSA implementation lessons



Make use of increased interest in CSA training:

Because monthly food rations for refugees are decreasing, they have refocused on participating in activities that supplement their livelihoods. Refugee farmers attended CSA trainings and meetings without refreshments, which were initially regarded as a necessity.



Household visioning leads to improved results:

The integration of household visioning and planning supports an increase in agricultural production, marketing and household development. This enables refugees to plan their households' incomes and expenditures irrespective of the relief support.



Use community structures to address community disputes and grievances:

Any disagreement within the community is best handled by the community structures, which include the Local Council and Refugee welfare council in close collaboration with local Governments, OPM & UNHCR. This works very well, and development partners should only act as referrals to these relevant stakeholders.



Mobilization of savings can be done by refugees:

Refugees can mobilize their own money and lend to each other, given proper training. This, therefore, calls for the use of a development approach in some respects of refugee programming rather than setting their minds on only humanitarian relief.

Conclusion:

NURI implemented its activities in the refugee context more seamlessly than anticipated. This led to the conclusion that it is better to be creative and explore new options in refugee programme implementation rather than repetition of what has already been done. It is also essential to do proper sensitization, clearly stipulating the program deliverables. This alleviates fear from beneficiaries while they decide whether to participate. Finally, it is important to share program implementation details, including lessons learned with refugee ecosystem actors to improve coordination, collaboration, and refugee intervention programming.