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## Refugee Socio-Cultural Integration and Peaceful Co-Existence in Uganda

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## **Refugee Socio-Cultural Integration and Peaceful Co-Existence in Uganda**

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*The dramatic increase in the number of refugees globally has led to increased attention to conflicts between refugees and communities in the countries where they have sought refuge. Three durable solutions are used for the placement of refugees: voluntary repatriation to their home country if conditions there permit; permanent settlement and local integration in the receiving country; and resettlement in a third country. Permanent settlement and local integration is seen as good option although there still exists gaps in understanding the integration process and if it leads to peaceful co-existence between refugees and members of the host community. This study therefore set out to help fill this information gap. The study employed descriptive analysis on cross-sectional data collected from 328 refugees respondents in Kiryandongo refugee settlement in Uganda. The legal integration process was generally not strong: many respondents still felt they were not legally integrated though they were optimistic about full legal integration in the future. The socio-cultural integration process was more successful. A large majority of refugee respondents in Kiryandongo interact with members of the host community and some are involved in joint projects and partnerships, such as businesses, with them. A large majority of refugees do not wish to be separate from the host community and want to settle in Uganda and have learned the local language; a majority want to bring their families to Uganda, and want good relations with the local host community, all positive indicators of behavioral and attitudinal socio-cultural integration and the development of social connection. A large majority of refugee respondents also believe that their interactions with members of the host community have not led to tensions but rather have contributed to peaceful co-existence with them. Refugee respondents also made suggestions for promoting peaceful co-existence. The study concludes with the recommendation of increasing opportunities for refugees and host community members to interact positively and develop relationships through educational and cultural events, and to develop partnerships/collaborative projects, especially in the use of resources such as water, and the generation of resources by such means as collaboration on business and economic ventures.*

The year 1951 marked the ratification of the United Nations Refugee Convention in which the international community defined a refugee as an individual who has left their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return owing to the well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion (McFadyen, 2012). According to the most recent annual global report of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018), in 2017 one person was forcibly displaced from their home every two seconds because of persecution or conflict. There were approximately 68.5 million forcibly displaced people globally, up from 65.3 million in 2016. While many of those people are internally displaced within their own countries, almost 25.4 million of them in 2017 were refugees, up from 21.3 in 2016. More than half of all refugees are under the age of 18. The UNHCR estimates that there are 10 million stateless people who have been denied

a nationality and such basic rights as freedom of movement, employment healthcare, and education. It appears that for many non-refugees today, the refugee is seen as a burden rather than an individual who is at risk and seeking sanctuary, and hostility toward the refugee has replaced hospitality in many (but not all) cases (McFadyen, 2012). Interaction with refugees can produce tensions and conflict, or it can produce peaceful co-existence. This essay explores those dynamics in the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in Uganda (see also Fleming, et al., 2018).

The focus of the international community since the 1990s has been engagement with refugees centering on refugees' emergencies, delivering humanitarian assistance to refugees and war afflicted populations (Loescher, et al., 2008). Millions of refugees struggle in refugee settlements, urban communities, and insecure parts of the globe. Most refugees have been in precarious situations for many years (UNHCR, 2016).

The world seems to largely ignore these situations. In his book *Portrait of a Tyrant* (1981), the Soviet historian Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko claimed that Stalin famously said: "When one man dies it's a tragedy. When thousands die it's a statistic." This seems true for the current refugee crisis. Thousands of refugees died in recent years trying to get to Europe and were largely ignored by the media. Suddenly the story of one three-year-old boy whose body was washed on the shore in Turkey caught the attention of the world concerning the global refugee crisis.

### **The African Refugee Situation**

The African refugee situation is comprised of refugees fleeing a war torn country to another country perceived to be safer; for example, there are refugees fleeing from Nigeria to Chad, South Sudan to Darfur, and from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Central African Republic. According to the UNHCR (2018), in 2017 Sub-Saharan African countries had a record number of more than 5.4 million refugees and 12.5 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). In Sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda was the main host country for refugees in 2017, welcoming 1.4 million refugees (UNHCR 2018), and the refugee settlement in Bidi Bidi Uganda has become the largest refugee settlement in the world today. While Uganda has recently experienced an influx of refugees from nearby countries such as Congo, South Sudan, and Burundi, it has been a host country for refugees since the 1950s (Karen, 2001) in areas such as Kabale, Kasese, Hoima, Bundibugyo, Masindi, Kigumba Bweyale, and Kyenjonjo in western Uganda, hosting refugees from Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, and Kenya (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004). The Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, the focus of this essay, is in the recently created Kiryandongo District of Uganda (RMF, 2016). The refugee population of the settlement was slightly over 65,000 refugees at the time of the study in 2016 (RMF, 2016). The Kiryandongo area was first used for resettling refugees in 1954. The British colonial administration moved Kenyan refugees fleeing the Mau Mau Uprising to Kigumba in what was then Masindi District. During the Idi Amin administration, the land was part of a large-scale government ranching scheme, of which reminders remain today in the names of the subdivisions of the settlement. This left the land sparsely populated (Kibego, 2014).

### **Refugees in Uganda, Kiryandongo District**

Uganda is regarded as one of the most favorable environments in the world for refugees, according to the UNHCR (World Bank, 2016) and is an active participant in the *UN Global Compact on Refugees* project. While many countries keep refugees in camps away from citizens, Uganda allows them to set up businesses, work for others, and to move freely around the country where refugees have lived since the 1950s. On arrival in Uganda, most refugees are settled in rural areas called refugee settlements under the Office of the Prime Minister.

When those seeking refuge arrive at the Ugandan border, they are transported by the UNHCR, with Ugandan government monitoring and other implementing partners of UNHCR, to a reception center. At the reception center, it takes at most two to five days, depending on the day of arrival, to be registered as a refugee. Some more complex cases may take from two weeks to one month to process as the individuals go through detailed interviews. After being registered as refugees, each refugee is immediately allocated a plot of land and building materials for a basic home, and given food aid and access to basic health and education services. This is known as Uganda's "self-reliance" policy which emphasizes livelihoods and self-help over aid to refugees. The Government of Uganda keeps refugees until the time they get a durable solution in one of three forms: a) Voluntary Repatriation, voluntarily returning back to their own country; b) Permanent Settlement and Local Integration in Ugandan society; or c) Resettlement in a third country.

Repatriation may not be possible because of continuing danger in the countries from which the refugees fled. According to international law, refugees cannot be forced by a host country to return to a dangerous situation. This leaves the possible durable solutions of permanent settlement and local integration, and resettlement in a third country as options. Permanent settlement in the country of asylum and integration into the local community offers a durable solution for refugees; the UNHCR supports local integration as one of the most durable solutions to the refugee crisis.

The Ugandan Refugee Act (2006) makes new provisions for matters relating to refugees (Government of Uganda, 2006; see also Government of Uganda/UNHCR 2017), in line with the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and other international obligations; to establish an Office of Refugees; to repeal the Control of Alien Refugees Act, Cap. 62; and to provide for other refugee-related matters (Andersson, 2013). Uganda's Local Governments Act encouraged participatory decision-making and led to the establishment of Refugee Welfare Councils to identify and respond to the developmental needs of refugees in consultation with the UNHCR; local integration as an option was defended (UNHCR, 2002). While the policy of self-reliance noted earlier does not automatically lead to permanent settlement and local integration, self-reliance is an important component of permanent settlement.

### **Integration and Refugee-Host Community Relations**

As noted earlier, permanent settlement and local integration is considered a good durable solutions for refugees by UNHCR, but it is also seen as a complex solution (UNHCR, 2002). Uganda has made progress in legal, economic and socio-cultural integration of refugees due to its policies in the Uganda Refugee Act of 2006 promoting self-reliant refugees (Government of Uganda, 2006; Government of Uganda/UNHCR 2017; RMF, 2016). Ideally, the self-reliance policy envisages that when refugees produce enough food for their subsistence, they will be able to meet all their livelihood needs, including non-food needs. The policy also does not isolate refugees in camps, but allows them to move about freely and interact with members of the host community, which hopefully will contribute to the integration of refugees with the host community and the development of harmonious relations or peaceful co-existence with the host community. For the purposes of this paper we intend to focus on the socio-cultural integration of refugees into the host community and the development of peaceful co-existence between them.

### **Map of Kiryandongo District**



The above map shows the location of the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in Uganda; it was formerly named the Masindi district in Uganda (Google Maps 2017).

### **The Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement**

The Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement is in the recently created Kiryandongo District of Uganda (RMF, 2016). The Kiryandongo area was first used for resettling refugees in 1954. The British colonial administration moved Kenyan refugees fleeing the Mau Mau Uprising to Kigumba in what was then Masindi District. During the Idi Amin administration, the land was part of a large-scale government ranching scheme, of which reminders remain today in the names of the subdivisions of the settlement. This left the land sparsely populated (Kibego, 2014). The settlement has refugees from Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, and Kenya (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004). This essay explores the degree of socio-cultural integration of refugees into the host community, and if that integration has contributed to peaceful co-existence, or rather increased tension and conflict; isolation and disassociation can prevent tensions and conflict, while increased contact and integration can increase tension and conflict as parties compete over resources, have more chances of misunderstandings and other problems of life together. Integration does not necessarily contribute to peaceful co-existence, nor does isolation or disassociation necessarily lead to tensions and conflict.

The refugee population of the settlement in 2016 was slightly over 65,000 refugees (RMF, 2016). The data presented in this essay were gathered in 2016 through a semi-structured questionnaire to collect quantitative and qualitative primary data from the respondents with the help of local language translators. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) were followed in selecting a representative sample of 320 respondents. Three focus groups composed of refugees were conducted to procure more qualitative information. The data presentation in this essay is based on the responses of the representative sample of 320 refugees living in the settlement and the three focus groups composed of refugees.

**Integration of refugees in Kiryandongo.** Integration has many definitions and many different dimensions (Ager and Strang 2008). These dimensions may include legal integration, economic integration, and socio-cultural integration among others (UNHCR, 2013). Among the proposed indicators of refugee integration into the host society is respect for the rights of refugees, citizenship rights, and access to education, employment, health care, and housing (see

UNHCR 2013; Ager and Strang, 2008). We define integration as “social connection within and between groups within the community” (Ager and Strang 2008, p. 166). Integration entails overcoming the “structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture and the local environment” (Ager and Strang, 2008, p. 166). The focus of this paper is socio-cultural integration. Drawing from Intergroup Contact Theory (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2011; Fleming et al., 2018) we propose that interaction and integration between refugees and members of the host community can contribute to harmonious relationships or peaceful co-existence. As refugees interact with and develop relationships with members of the host community, developing social connection and social bonds, the likelihood for peaceful co-existence increases and prejudice and stereotyping can be reduced. We contend that learning the local language and collaborating/partnering in economic and cultural projects are important forms of positive interaction and the development of social connection. The development of such integration/social connection contributes to peaceful co-existence, which is characterized by the lack of prejudice and discrimination and the lack of social tensions and serious conflict, as well as the expectations of such tension and conflict. Peaceful co-existence entails expectations of positive relations and acceptance by members of the broader community and the freedom to pursue one’s legitimate goals without negative reactions by others. The research presented here supports the contention that interaction and integration/social connection contributes to peaceful co-existence and is consistent with what Fleming et al. (2018) concluded after their study of data from 140 countries: “interpersonal contact with migrants can help moderate potential prejudice and discrimination across national boundaries, cultures, and languages” (p. 129). We do not see prejudice and discrimination as characteristics of peaceful co-existence. However, we are aware that intergroup contact can reinforce prejudice and contribute to tensions and conflict; further research needs to be done on the specific ways to promote interaction and social connection between refugees and host community members that will contribute to peaceful co-existence. .

### **Indicators of Socio-Cultural Integration**

We contend that socio-cultural integration has an important attitudinal component as well as a behavioral component. One behavioral indicator we use for social-cultural integration is learning the local language, which facilitates effective and positive interaction as well as indicates a desire remain in the host country. Another behavioral indicator is refugee interaction with members of the host community as opposed to isolation and avoidance of interaction. We contend that refugees who want to remain separate from the host community, perhaps because of fear of assimilation/loss of cultural identity and/or domination, will avoid interaction.

Among the attitudinal indicators of integration that we are using are the desire of the refugees to have good relations with the local community; the desire to have their families come to live with them in Uganda (family reunification); and the desire to settle in Uganda.

We see such attitudes as “psychological integration” – the refugee has made the psychological transition to settling in and participating in the host society. The behavioural and attitudinal indicators are complementary; for example we would expect that if we find a high number of refugees expressing a desire to settle in Uganda, we also would expect to find a high number of refugees that learned the local language. In fact, that is what we find in Table 2.

### **Presentation of Refugee Responses**

Table 1 shows the respondents’ general feeling about building relationships with the host community members. We see that a majority of 55% of the respondents would like to build relationships with host community members. However, a slightly lower percentage (45%)

think they will not be able to do this. This suggests that there could be unacceptance of refugees by some members of the host community. However, as we shall see in Figure 1, a large majority (69%) of respondents believe that their interactions with members of the host community has contributed to peaceful co-existence with them.

In addition, the study used the willingness to be reunited to their families as a measure of comfort in settling in the given areas. We see in Table 1 that 52% of the respondents report that they would like their families to be reunited with them in Uganda. This suggests that a majority of refugees are getting comfortable and starting to feel at home where they have been settled and would like to bring their other family members here. Yet slightly less than half (48%) think they will be able to reunite with their families. It appears that Uganda’s integration policy has had some effect in increasing refugee comfort to settle in the area but some refugees still may not understand the legal opportunity for family reunification.

**Table 1: Relationship Building (N=320).**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Would like to (%)</b>	<b>I think I will (%)</b>
Getting good relations with local community	55	45
Family reunification	52	48

Communication is very important for effective and positive interaction with the host community. In Table 2 we see that 73% of the respondents know the local language. Besides facilitating interaction, the desire to understand the host community’s language is an indicator of the interest to live in or integrate into that community. For social connection, and peaceful co-existence, people need to understand each other and be communicating well. Learning the local language opens many doors for refugee integration, such as helping refugees find jobs, understand and act on their rights, make friends, and so on.

In addition, Table 2 shows that 81% of the respondents would like settle in Uganda. This further highlights the comfort refugees are now feeling to prefer a foreign country to their original home countries. Language and settlement can be coordinated in some ways. Once people start speaking in a common language integration is quicker, relationships are easier to build and inter-marriages (which are reportedly increasing) take place between the host community members and refugees.

**Table 2: Local Language and Settlement (N=320)**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Yes (%)</b>	<b>No (%)</b>
Local language skills	73	27
Settling in Uganda	81	19

Table 3 below summarizes the major reasons why refugees would like to settle in Uganda. A major reason given (38%) is the peaceful environment in Uganda and the friendliness of Ugandans. The second most popular answer (17%) is that Uganda increases the freedom and opportunities for the refugees, while the third most popular (13%) is Uganda’s fertile soils and good climate. These top three reasons are positive assessments of Uganda, whereas the fourth most common answer (12%), political instabilities in the refugee’s country of origin, is a negative assessment of the situation in their home countries. We see then that the desire of refugees to settle in Uganda is based on pull and push factors, not just the push factor of danger

in their home countries. Such positive assessments of Uganda undoubtedly contribute in a positive way to the integration process.

It is worth noting that in Table 3 we see that a minority of respondents, 19% or almost one in five, did not want to settle in Uganda. We should not ignore the feelings of the minority in humanitarian research because everyone matters and deserves attention. So, this study further examined the reasons why these people are not willing to settle in Uganda. The most common response was related to patriotism. One of the respondents answered, "I have to go back and work for my country." This indicates that no matter how good the integration policy and the environment is, some few patriotic people will still prefer to go back home to rebuild their countries. This implies that integration policy should not overlook the option for willing individuals to be voluntarily repatriated when they feel they are ready to go back home. Other reasons for not willing to settle were related to the nature of life in the settlements. Some respondents felt that life in the settlement was harder than it is back home and therefore would prefer to go home and re-establish themselves. In addition, one other response that came out was related to knowledge about the possibility of legal integration. Some respondents say they would not settle in Uganda because there is no legal provision for them to enjoy citizenship rights. While this is clearly not true, it indicates a gap in policy communication. Apparently some refugees still do not know of such rights accorded to them by the existing policies in the Ugandan Refugee Act of 2006.

**Table 3: Reasons for settling in Uganda (N=320)**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Uganda is peaceful, and Ugandans are friendly people	38
Living in Uganda increases my freedoms and opportunities for me and my family	17
Uganda has fertile soils with good climate	13
Because of political instabilities in our country of origin	12
Uganda is a free place without war and offering good education for our children	4
Good security and very low cost of food	4
To preserve my life	2
Under Refugee Law and Rights, People deserve this opportunity	2
There is the rule of law in Uganda leading to peace	2
Integration and self-reliance through sustainability	2

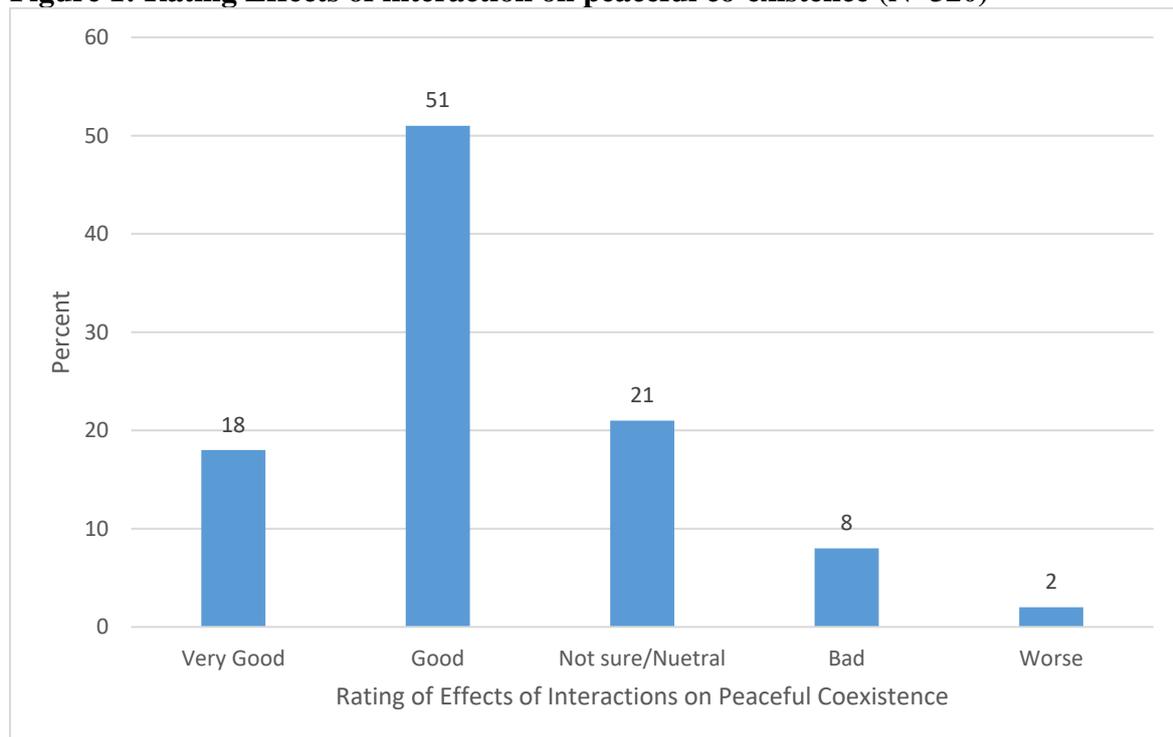
### **Socio- Cultural Integration and Peaceful Co-existence**

The interaction of refugees with members of the host community is an indicator of, and pre-requisite for, integration/social connection. There can be no integration without interaction. But, as noted earlier, integration does not necessarily lead to peaceful relations and in fact can lead to an increase in tensions and conflict as members of different groups compete for resources, the chances for misunderstanding increase, and so on.

The study found that a large number of respondents, around seven in ten (70%), interacted with members of the host community. Respondents also were asked what the effect of these interactions was on harmonious relations or peaceful co-existence with members of the host

community. As we see in Figure 1 below, most respondents, 69%, almost seven in ten respondents, believe that interacting with members of the host community helped foster peaceful co-existence with the host community. According to these findings we see that interaction/integration did not lead to intergroup tensions and conflict but rather contributed to peaceful relations. We contend that in largely non-hostile environments, interactions can help to build positive social connections and friendships. As people from different communities who speak the same language get to learn about each other's lives and cultures, there tends to be better communication and understanding of each other's differences. Understanding the lives and differences that exist can help to foster acceptance and respect for each other's differences and contribute to peaceful co-existence (see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011; Fleming, et al., 2018).

**Figure 1: Rating Effects of interaction on peaceful co-existence (N=320)**



The refugees and host community members have been interacting and collaborating on various joint projects, such as the use of water points (wells); sharing of schools; and doing small-scale business together. Consistent with the research on the relationship-building role of superordinate goals in the Intergroup Contact Theory literature (see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011), these collaborative projects and shared resources have helped build relationships between refugees and members of the host community. Games and sports also can be an avenue for meeting and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds in a context where the ethnic and origin differences are not salient. Community events like traditional and cultural expositions can bring people together and provide a positive environment in which to affirm the identity of one's group and learn about other groups (see Fitzduff, 2002). It should be noted that in one focus group refugees showed an understanding of the relationship of interaction and conflict. They suggested that if resources are increased by the government and UNHCR, it would help peaceful relations since limited resources can cause conflict. In some of the interviews the refugees said that marriages between refugees and members of the host community also helped build bonds and social connection and helped to increase the understanding of each other's culture and respect for each other. In Table 4 below, we see a range of respondents' suggestions about how to promote peaceful co-existence between

refugees and the host community. Among the most common suggestions by the respondents are: ideas sharing; free interactions; preaching peace; and games and sports.

**Table 4: How to promote peaceful co-existence (N=320)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Sharing ideas and feeling together about peaceful living	17
Interacting freely with other people	14
Preaching peace	11
Promoting peaceful living with others	10
Sports and games	10
By avoiding fights and abiding by the law	9
The golden rule: do to others what you would like them to do to you	9
Through development initiatives	6
Advocating for unity and being impartial in conflict	4
Sensitization about peace	2
Counselling	2
Increasing resources such as land size and water points	2
Through use of proverbs and other traditional African values	2
Being friendly to everyone	2

Surprisingly, the study found that 45% of the refugee respondents were afraid of strangers, which is a relatively high number. Apparently, even some of the refugees that are interacting with members of the host community are somewhat suspicious of them, though as we also saw 69% of refugees believed that interactions helped build peaceful co-existence. Also, even though Uganda has an accommodating nationality policy in place, a respectable number of refugees (35%) were still facing problems related to their nationality status. This could be understandable in the sense that most rural people in Sub-Saharan Africa lack proper documentation of their nationality status. While this may not pose a problem per se if one is still in their home country, it becomes a major challenge when they find themselves being forced to flee their homes at short notice. This implies that Ugandan integration policy still has a gap to fill in reducing nationality related problems. Without such clear identification, access to public service and livelihood enhancing opportunities is hampered, which could be the defining factor of whether or not one will ever be able to sustain themselves and their family.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, we described the current refugee situation globally and in Sub-Saharan Africa, and have explored Uganda's refugee policy, considered to be one of the best in the world. This data presented in this essay is based on research conducted at the refugee settlement in Kiryandongo, Uganda in 2016 and focuses on refugees' behavioral and attitudinal or "psychological" integration and its relation to peaceful co-existence with the host community. The study found that a significant majority of refugees interacted with members of the host

community; learned the local language; wanted to settle in Uganda. We also found that a majority of respondents wanted good relations with the host community and wanted to bring their families to Uganda. We also found that 45%, close to half of the refugees surveyed, were afraid of strangers, yet 70% of refugees interacted with members of the host community and, consistent with Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011; Fleming et al., 2018), we found that seven out of ten refugees (69%), thought that interaction with members of the host community enhanced peaceful co-existence with them. The seeming contradiction between the number of refugees expressing a fear of strangers and the high levels of interaction and belief that interaction enhanced peaceful co-existence needs further investigation. Nevertheless, we contend that the data warrant the conclusion that interaction and integration/social connection has made a major contribution to peaceful co-existence rather than leading to increased tensions and conflict, which is another possible outcome. The study also found that interaction and social connection in the form of collaborative projects between refugees and host community members, cultural events and sports and games made an important contribution to the development of peaceful co-existence. Further research is needed on the best ways to initiate and facilitate interactions and collaborative projects that contribute to peaceful co-existence between refugees and members of host communities (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2011; Fleming et al., 2018).

This essay is limited in that only the responses of refugees were presented because of the population surveyed. But to foster peaceful co-existence the views of both refugees and host community members are equally important. The views of host community members should be sought in future studies.

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