

Child Protection System And Refugee Children: A Case Of Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement,

Kiryandongo District, Uganda

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the child protection system among refugee children in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. The research particularly sought out to assess the current state of the child protection system; to identify the interventions for enhancing child protection systems and to assess the challenges of interventions in enhancing child protection systems. Kiryandongo refugee settlement was selected as the research site because it is the largest and longest established and provides a good representation of the camp-based refugee population in Uganda. The study population included: adult men and women, young men and women (aged between 12 and 20 years old) and young children (aged between 7-10 years old). In addition, key stakeholders in child protection in the camps were interviewed including staff from UN agencies, NGOs, Ugandan Government institutions, refugee authorities, child protection committees, school staff and religious leaders. In total, 55 respondents participated in the research through 4 group discussions (FGD), 55 in-depth interviews (IDI) and 10 key informant interviews (KII). To achieve this, the research tools that were used for this study included: group discussions on Child protection systems. The FGD's discussions consisted of male and female adults and young people. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were also another tool in this study. The interviews were conducted among male and female adults and young people whereas key informant interviews targeted young children, and these were designed to elicit sources of children's distress and wellbeing. The study revealed that; Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement's child protection system is fair. The three sectors that make up the system are the social, security, and education sectors.

Keywords: Child Protection System, Refugee Children, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

Background of the Study

Nearly 50 million children worldwide have crossed international borders or been forcibly displaced in quest of a safer future free from persecution, bloodshed, bombs, and bullets. In 2016 the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people around the world have topped 65 million (A. I. Kazaara & Nancy, 2025). As of December 2015, there were 65.3 million displaced people (Attilio 2019). It represents 4 nearly 10 percent increase over 59.5 million. And most of those refugees, 86 percent, are hosted in developing countries. More than half of the world's refugees in 2015 were children; (UNHCR, 2016). More so, Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to host one quarter of all refugees, an indication that the trend of refugee number had been increasing partly due to conflict related crises in different parts of the world including in East Africa (Attilio 2019).

The plight of refugee children represents one of the most pressing humanitarian and human rights challenges of the 21st century, with an estimated 36.4 million children forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict, persecution, and climate-related disasters (UNHCR, 2023). This global crisis necessitates a robust international protection framework, primarily grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which articulates the universal rights of all children to survival, development, protection, and

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participation(Julius & Audrey, 2026). These norms are further elaborated for displaced contexts by the UNHCR's Guidelines on International Protection and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, which collectively mandate states and humanitarian actors to provide specialized care and safeguard the well-being of child refugees (Mazurana et al., 2022). However, the translation of these universal instruments into practical protection is consistently hindered by a chronic "implementation gap," where political will, funding, and operational capacity fall drastically short of documented needs, leaving millions of children in legal and physical limbo(Vincent & Peter, 2023).

This implementation gap is exacerbated by the increasingly protracted nature of displacement, with the average refugee situation now lasting over 20 years, transforming temporary humanitarian emergencies into long-term, chronic crises for children (Crawford et al., 2023). Within these protracted settings, traditional family and community protection mechanisms are often fractured or destroyed, while formal national child protection systems in host countries are frequently inaccessible or unwilling to include non-citizens (Julius & Desire, 2025). Consequently, refugee children face exponentially heightened and intersecting risks of violence, exploitation, and abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child labour, trafficking, recruitment by armed groups, and forced marriage (Stark et al., 2022). The global humanitarian system's response, typically coordinated through the Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CP AoR), often struggles with a reactive, siloed approach that prioritizes immediate, life-saving needs over the holistic, long-term development of resilient child protection systems(Tumusabe Ezera et al., 2022).

A critical systemic failure at the global level is the persistent exclusion of refugee children and youth from meaningful participation in the decisions that affect their lives(Julius & Kaazara, 2025). Despite the CRC's emphasis on children's right to be heard, programming is often designed through top-down, donor-driven models that fail to account for children's own agency, perspectives, and cultural contexts (Mann & Tolfree, 2022). This exclusion not only violates their rights but also leads to ineffective interventions that do not address their real-world vulnerabilities or leverage their capacities(Vasile et al., 2023). Furthermore, the global data and evidence base on what works in refugee child protection remains weak, with a scarcity of rigorous, longitudinal studies and an over-reliance on anecdotal reporting, which hampers the development of evidence-based policies and programs capable of adapting to diverse displacement contexts (Wessells, 2021).

Ultimately, the global child protection landscape for refugees is characterized by a stark contradiction: a well-articulated set of international norms exists alongside widespread and systematic protection failures. The systemic weaknesses including inconsistent funding, inadequate cross-border coordination, securitized immigration policies that criminalize movement, and the failure to address root causes of displacement create environments where exploitation thrives(Julius & Audrey, 2025). Therefore, analyzing child protection systems requires a critical examination of how these global frameworks and failures manifest and are negotiated at regional, national, and hyper-local levels, particularly in regions like Africa that host a disproportionate share of the world's refugee children (Olonisakin & Akinola, 2021).

Africa hosts over a third of the world's forcibly displaced population, with children constituting more than half, placing immense strain on the continent's often-fragile social and protection ecosystems (UNHCR, 2023). The

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regional legal framework, notably the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990), provides a culturally contextualized complement to the CRC, emphasizing communal obligations and prohibiting harmful social and cultural practices. However, the capacity of African Union member states to operationalize these commitments is severely constrained by pervasive poverty, under-resourced social services, political instability, and the compounding effects of climate change, which themselves are significant drivers of displacement (African Child Policy Forum, 2022). National child protection systems across the continent, where they exist, are typically fragmented, underfunded, and reliant on non-state actors, making the additional burden of responding to large-scale refugee influxes a profound challenge (Julius & Nancy, 2025).

The child protection response in African refugee settings is predominantly humanitarian in nature, coordinated through complex clusters involving UN agencies (primarily UNHCR and UNICEF), international NGOs, and a growing number of local community-based organizations. While this multi-agency approach can mobilize resources, it often leads to the creation of parallel, temporary systems that are poorly integrated with national government structures, undermining sustainability and local ownership (Twikirize & Asingwire, 2022). A significant trend in Africa is the shift from closed camp models to integrated settlement or out-of-camp policies, as seen in Uganda and Ethiopia, which aim to promote self-reliance and social cohesion (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022a). While promising, this integration approach introduces distinct protection challenges, including competition over scarce resources with host communities, increased exposure to exploitation in local labour markets, and strained access to already over-subscribed health and education services (Betts et al., 2022). Persistent armed conflict and political violence in regions like the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes continue to generate acute protection threats for children, including abduction, military recruitment, and direct exposure to atrocities (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022b). Furthermore, displacement disrupts social norms and economic livelihoods, leading to a documented rise in negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage, where families marry off daughters in hopes of securing protection or reducing economic strain (Mugo et al., 2021). The continent also faces the critical challenge of supporting unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), whose numbers swell during sudden-onset emergencies; family tracing and reunification processes are often slow and under-resourced, leaving these children in precarious temporary care arrangements that may not meet their developmental or psychosocial needs.

Despite these challenges, Africa is also a site of notable innovation and resilience in child protection (Victor et al., 2023). Community-based mechanisms, such as Child Protection Committees (CPCs) composed of trained refugee and host community volunteers, form the frontline of identification, reporting, and response. The strength of communal life in many African societies provides a vital asset, with extended family and ethno-cultural networks often stepping in to provide foster care and support (Krause, 2022). The future of effective child protection on the continent depends on better financing for national systems, deeper collaboration between humanitarian and development actors (the humanitarian-development-peace nexus), and, crucially, policies that recognize and reinforce the capacities of refugees themselves, including children and youth, as agents of their own protection and contributors to community resilience (Hovil, 2021).

Uganda is globally recognized for its progressive refugee policy, governed by the 2006 Refugee Act and the 2010 Refugee Regulations, which grant refugees rights to freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to national services through a settlement model integrated with host districts (Julius & Audrey, 2026). This Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) approach positions Uganda as a model for promoting refugee self-reliance and social cohesion, theoretically creating a more stable environment for child protection than restrictive camp settings (Betts et al., 2022). Domestically, Uganda's child protection legal architecture is anchored in the Children Act (Cap. 59), which is aligned with the CRC and ACRWC, and establishes mandates for family protection, care, and justice for children. However, hosting over 1.5 million refugees the largest number in Africa has tested the limits of this progressive framework, revealing critical gaps between policy aspiration and practical implementation (Christopher et al., 2022).

The integration model places the responsibility for service delivery, including child protection, on district local governments, whose systems are already severely strained and underfunded. Key statutory actors, such as probation and social welfare officers, police Child and Family Protection Units, and local council courts, are chronically overstretched, with minimal resources to cover the expansive needs of both Ugandan nationals and the refugee population (Twikirize & Asingwire, 2022). Consequently, the day-to-day child protection service delivery in settlements remains heavily dependent on international and national NGOs, leading to concerns about coordination, inequity of services, and the sustainability of interventions should donor funding decline. This reliance creates a de facto parallel system that can inadvertently weaken the capacity and accountability of state structures (Nancy & Prudence, 2024).

Uganda's refugee settlements, while open, are often located in remote, underdeveloped regions of the country. This geography compounds protection risks, as poverty and scarcity affect both host and refugee communities, fostering tensions and increasing children's vulnerability to exploitation (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022a). Specific, well-documented protection issues across Ugandan settlements include high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child labour on commercial farms bordering settlements, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and significant school dropout rates, particularly among adolescent girls (Agency & Development, 2023). The government's strategy of allocating land for refugees to cultivate promotes self-reliance but also exposes children to risks of land disputes, hazardous labour, and separation from caregivers working long hours in distant fields.

Despite these challenges, Uganda has pioneered community-led protection structures within settlements. Refugee welfare councils (RWCs) and, specifically, child protection committees (CPCs) are trained to serve as the first line of defense, identifying at-risk children, mediating disputes, and referring severe cases to specialized actors (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). The government and partners have also made efforts to include refugee children in national programs, such as immunisation campaigns and primary education, though secondary and tertiary education access remains a major gap (Joshua, 2026). The effectiveness of Uganda's model, therefore, provides a critical national case study on whether a rights-based, integrative approach can genuinely deliver on child protection promises amid massive numbers and finite resources, with implications for refugee policy worldwide (Hovil, 2021).

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Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in mid-western Uganda, hosting over 100,000 refugees primarily from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, serves as a poignant microcosm for analyzing the on-the-ground realities of child protection systems within Uganda's celebrated model. Established in the 1990s and having expanded through multiple influxes, the settlement's population reflects the complex traumas of protracted conflicts, with many children having been born into displacement or witnessed extreme violence (Lokot, 2021). The operational child protection system in Kiryandongo is a hybrid, multi-layered network involving UNHCR and its implementing partners, district local government officials (often present in limited capacity), refugee-led community structures, and traditional leaders (Julius & Audrey, 2026). This network operates within a physical environment of sprawling villages, shared public spaces, and agricultural plots, where risks and protective factors are intensely localized.

At the community level, the most active component is the network of trained refugee volunteers serving on Child Protection Committees (CPCs) and as Foster Care Parents. These individuals are critical for surveillance, initial response, and community mobilization, operating within their own neighbourhoods and cultural contexts (Mugo et al., 2021). However, their work is fraught with challenges: they often lack adequate logistical support (such as phones or transportation for referrals), receive minimal or no remuneration leading to volunteer fatigue, and may face social backlash or security threats when intervening in sensitive cases like domestic violence or child marriage (Krause, 2022). Their effectiveness is also contingent on a functional referral pathway to specialized services such as case management, psychosocial support, safe shelters, and legal aid which are themselves under-resourced and may have long waiting lists.

Specific protection issues in Kiryandongo are severe and interlinked. High levels of poverty and food insecurity drive negative coping strategies, including child labour on the vast commercial farms that neighbour the settlement, where children are exposed to hazardous conditions and exploitation (Ahere, 2022). Domestic violence and child neglect are frequently reported, often linked to parental stress, alcoholism, and disputes over scarce resources. Adolescent girls face particular risks of sexual exploitation and early pregnancy, sometimes in exchange for basic necessities or school fees, while boys are at risk of recruitment into community militias or criminal gangs. The mental health burden is immense, with widespread symptoms of trauma, depression, and anxiety among children, yet mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services are critically understaffed and lack long-term therapeutic capacity (Nancy & Prudence, 2024).

The settlement's proximity to economic hubs presents a double-edged sword: it offers opportunities for livelihood but also increases exposure to external threats. Finally, the future of child protection in Kiryandongo hinges on addressing systemic constraints: strengthening the capacity and formal integration of community-based structures into the district system; improving sustainable funding for child-focused NGOs; ensuring accountability for service delivery; and most importantly, creating safe channels for the meaningful participation of refugee children and youth in identifying problems and designing solutions that affect their daily lives and futures (Lokot, 2021). An in-depth analysis of Kiryandongo thus reveals the ultimate test of the global child protection regime its ability to safeguard the most vulnerable in the specific, complex, and resource-scarce reality of a single settlement.

Problem Statement

With the disintegration of social protective systems around children because of conflict in South Sudan, the Ugandan government, with the help of development partners, has done a lot to improve child well-being (Julius & Kaazara, 2025). This is demonstrated through efforts of child protection such as the continued implementation of a comprehensive child protection program covering strengthening the national child protection system, providing supplementary child protection services such as case management and alternative care, and empowering children, families, and communities to prevent and respond to child abuse, neglect, violence, and exploitation, guided by the Uganda Country Refugees Response Plan (UNHCR 2024). Despite the government's efforts to strengthen the child protection system, children in the Kiryandongo refugee settlement are nonetheless exposed to abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

It is important to stress that refugee children in Kiryandongo confront significant hazards to their physical, mental, and social well-being (Vasile et al., 2023). Key challenges include Family Separation: Many children are unaccompanied or separated from their families, making them susceptible to exploitation. Child Labor and Exploitation: Economic constraints frequently lead youngsters into dangerous job conditions. Early and Forced Marriages: Cultural and economic reasons contribute to early marriages, especially among females; Limited Access to Education: Overcrowded schools and a lack of resources impede children's access to quality education. Psychosocial Trauma: Violence and displacement cause long-term psychological consequences. Against this backdrop, this study assessed the child protection system among refugee children in the Kiryandongo refugee camp.

Objectives of the study

The overall objective of the study was to assess the child protection system among refugee children in Kiryandongo refugee settlement, Kiryandongo district.

Specific objectives were to

- i. To assess the current state of the child protection system in Kiryandongo refugee settlement.
- ii. To identify the interventions for enhancing child protection systems in Kiryandongo refugee settlement.
- iii. To assess the challenges of interventions in enhancing child protection systems in Kiryandongo refugee settlement

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

- i. What is the current state of the child protection system in Kiryandongo refugee settlement?
- ii. What interventions are applied to enhance child protection systems in Kiryandongo refugee settlements?
- iii. What challenges are faced by the different organizations in enhancing child protection systems in Kiryandongo refugee settlement?

Scope of the study

Content Scope

The study focused on analyzing the child protection system among refugee children in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. Specifically, the study examined the forms of child protection risks faced by refugee children such as

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abuse, neglect, child labor, early marriage, trafficking, and denial of basic rights. It further assessed the existing child protection mechanisms, including legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, community-based protection structures, and the role of humanitarian agencies and government institutions (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022a). The study also analyzed challenges affecting the effectiveness of child protection systems and identified possible intervention strategies for strengthening child protection among refugee children.

Geographical Scope

The study was conducted in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, located in Kiryandongo District in Western Uganda. The settlement hosts refugees mainly from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other neighboring countries (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022a). The choice of Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement was based on its large refugee population, diversity of refugee communities, and the prevalence of child protection concerns within the settlement.

Time Scope

The study covered a period of five years from 2019 to 2024. This period was considered appropriate because it captures recent developments in refugee child protection policies, humanitarian interventions, and emerging protection challenges affecting refugee children in Uganda.

Significance of the Study

Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD): The findings of this study will assist the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of child protection systems in refugee settlements. This will support policy formulation, monitoring, and strengthening of child protection programs targeting refugee children.

Office of the Prime Minister (OPM): The study will benefit the Office of the Prime Minister by highlighting gaps in the coordination and implementation of refugee child protection policies. The findings will guide improved planning, supervision, and integration of child protection services in refugee-hosting communities.

Humanitarian and Development Agencies: Organizations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, NGOs, and community-based organizations will use the study findings to design evidence-based child protection interventions, improve service delivery, and strengthen community child protection mechanisms within refugee settlements.

Local Government Authorities: Kiryandongo District Local Government will benefit from the study through improved understanding of child protection challenges faced by refugee children. This will enhance district-level planning, budgeting, and collaboration with humanitarian actors to safeguard children's rights.

Academic Institutions and Researchers: The study will contribute to existing academic literature on refugee child protection systems. It will serve as a reference material for students, researchers, and scholars undertaking studies in social work, development studies, public administration, and refugee studies.

Refugee Communities: The findings will create awareness among refugee communities on child protection issues and promote community participation in preventing child abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

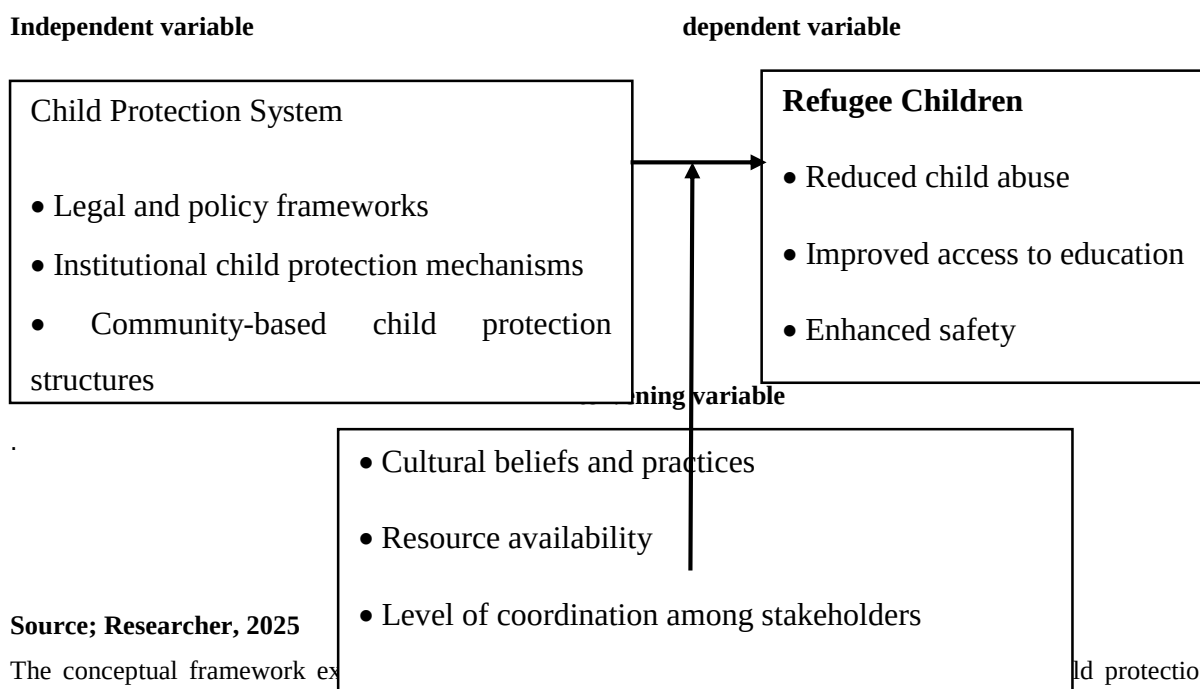
1.8 Conceptual frame work

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between **independent variables**, **intervening variables**, and the **dependent variable**.

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Source; Researcher, 2025

The conceptual framework explores the relationship between the child protection system among refugee children in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. The independent variables include legal and policy frameworks, institutional child protection mechanisms, community-based protection structures, humanitarian assistance programs, and awareness of child rights. These factors determine how child protection services are designed, implemented, and accessed within the settlement.

The dependent variable is the effectiveness of the child protection system, measured through reduced cases of child abuse and exploitation, improved access to basic services, and enhanced safety and wellbeing of refugee children.

The relationship between the independent and dependent variables is influenced by intervening variables such as cultural practices, resource availability, stakeholder coordination, and security conditions. These factors can either enhance or limit the success of child protection interventions.

Overall, the framework shows that effective child protection among refugee children depends on strong policies, functional institutions, active community involvement, and adequate humanitarian support, operating within a supportive social and institutional environment.

Definition of key terms

Child Protection System: A set of laws, policies, institutions, services, and community mechanisms designed to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children.

Refugee Child: A child who has fled his or her country of origin due to conflict, persecution, or violence and is residing in a refugee settlement under international protection.

Refugee Settlement: A designated area established by the government to host refugees and provide them with basic services and protection.

Abuse: Any form of physical, emotional, sexual, or psychological harm inflicted on a child.

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Neglect: Failure by parents, caregivers, or institutions to provide adequate care, supervision, or basic needs necessary for a child's development.

Literature Review

Refugee children constitute nearly half of the global forcibly displaced population, facing compounded vulnerabilities that necessitate robust protection systems. These vulnerabilities arise from the traumatic experiences of conflict and flight, the breakdown of familial and community structures, and the precarious conditions within settlements. Children in these settings are at heightened risk of violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, child labour, and gender-based violence (UNHCR, 2023; UNICEF, 2022). The child protection system in a refugee settlement refers to the interconnected set of laws, policies, regulations, and services aimed at preventing and responding to these risks. Assessing its current state is critical, as effective protection is not only a fundamental human right but also essential for sustainable development and long-term recovery (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Wessells, 2016). The international legal framework, anchored by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UNHCR's protection mandate, provides the normative basis for such systems, yet a significant implementation gap persists between policy and practice in camp and settlement contexts (Tyler et al., 2021; Connolly et al., 2022).

Formal child protection systems in refugee settings are typically built upon a multi-layered structure involving international agencies, host government authorities, and NGOs. The "best interests of the child" principle, as outlined in the CRC, is the intended cornerstone. UNHCR and UNICEF often lead coordination through the Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CP AoR) within the broader humanitarian cluster system, aiming to standardize interventions (UNHCR, 2023; Save the Children, 2021). Key components include case management for individual at-risk children, psychosocial support (PSS) programs, family tracing and reunification (FTR) for separated children, and community-based child protection mechanisms. However, the efficacy of these structures is heavily mediated by the national laws and capacity of the host country, which may lack comprehensive child protection legislation or resources to extend services to refugee populations (Ressler et al., 2020; Jansen, 2021). This often creates a parallel, quasi-formal system that can be fragmented and inconsistent, struggling with issues of legal jurisdiction and the recognition of refugee status in host nation legal frameworks.

Given the limitations of formal, externally-led systems, Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms have become a central focus of intervention and research. CBCPMs are structures such as child protection committees, community watch groups, or religious networks that are mobilized or supported to identify, prevent, and respond to child protection concerns at the local level (Wessells, 2015). Evidence suggests that when culturally grounded and appropriately supported, CBCPMs can improve reporting, provide immediate psychosocial first aid, facilitate referrals, and drive positive social norm change regarding issues like child marriage and corporal punishment (Mazurana et al., 2021; Stark et al., 2022). Their strength lies in their accessibility, local legitimacy, and understanding of context-specific risks. However, challenges persist, including the overburdening of volunteers, lack of sustainable funding, potential for reinforcing harmful power dynamics, and weak linkages with formal statutory services, which can leave severe cases inadequately addressed (Bennouna et al., 2022; Asimaki, 2023).

Despite decades of humanitarian practice, systemic gaps continue to undermine child protection. A primary challenge is chronic underfunding; child protection remains one of the least-funded sectors in humanitarian appeals, leading to shallow programming, high staff turnover, and inadequate coverage (Child Protection AoR, 2022; O'Donnell & Verutes, 2023). Furthermore, the sector grapples with a severe shortage of trained, professional social workers in displacement settings, leaving complex cases to be managed by overstretched community volunteers or non-specialist staff (Jordans et al., 2021). Data collection and information management systems are often weak, hampering effective identification, tracking, and evidence-based programming. Crucially, there is frequently a disconnect between child protection and other sectors like education, health, and food security, missing opportunities for integrated, preventive support (Robinson et al., 2022; Taggart, 2023). These gaps are exacerbated in protracted crises, where donor attention wanes but protection needs intensify.

Contemporary assessments must account for new and escalating risks. Digital technologies, while offering opportunities for education and connection, have introduced dangers such as online sexual exploitation and abuse, cyberbullying, and trafficking schemes operated through social media—threats for which most settlement-based systems are ill-prepared (Livingstone et al., 2022; Inter-Agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 2023). Climate change is another multiplier, as environmental degradation and disasters in host countries can strain resources, increase competition, and heighten protection risks for refugee children (Almosawa & Ghattas, 2023). Additionally, the global COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed the fragility of these systems; lockdowns disrupted services, school closures increased risks of child labour and violence at home, and community-based mechanisms were initially immobilized (Katz et al., 2021; Petrowski et al., 2021). These evolving contexts demand adaptive and forward-looking protection strategies.

A growing body of literature emphasizes that effective protection must be participatory and child-centred. This involves moving beyond viewing children as passive victims to recognizing them as rights-holders with agency and perspectives essential to designing relevant services (Lundy, 2018; Cuevas-Parra, 2020). Participatory tools, such as child-led clubs, youth advisory boards, and participatory action research, have shown promise in building children's resilience, improving program relevance, and identifying hidden risks like bullying or unsafe water collection points (Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2022; Stathopoulou, 2023). However, tokenistic participation remains a concern, and meaningful engagement requires dedicated time, resources, and a shift in adult attitudes within humanitarian structures. Ensuring the inclusion of often-marginalized groups—such as adolescents, children with disabilities, and unaccompanied minors—is a particular challenge that requires targeted outreach and accessible methodologies (Kiani, 2021; Wickenden & El-Lahib, 2022).

Assessing the state of child protection systems is hindered by significant weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Much programming has historically been driven by donor requirements and inputs rather than robust outcomes-based evidence (Holloway & Tobin, 2020). Measuring the impact of protection interventions such as whether a child feels safer or whether a community's protective norms have shifted is complex and methodologically challenging. Recent efforts aim to strengthen M&E through frameworks like the Child Protection Minimum Standards (CPMS) indicators and the use of mixed-methods research (CPMS Steering Committee, 2023). Promising approaches include participatory M&E with children, resilience measurement

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scales adapted for conflict-affected youth, and systems mapping to understand referral pathways (Ager et al., 2021; Stark et al., 2022). Building a stronger evidence base is essential to advocate for resources, demonstrate effectiveness, and guide the professionalization of the field.

The current state of child protection systems in refugee settlements is characterized by a recognized framework of rights and standards, innovative grassroots mechanisms like CBCPMs, but also by profound structural weaknesses, funding shortfalls, and challenges in adapting to new risks. The literature converges on the need for a paradigm shift from short-term, project-based interventions toward investing in integrated, resilient, and sustainable systems. This entails stronger collaboration between humanitarian and development actors (the “nexus” approach), capacity building for host government social service workforces, and sustainable financing models (Tanaka & O’Dell, 2023; Grandi & Fore, 2022). Ultimately, an effective system is one that is anchored in national law, empowered by communities, informed by children’s voices, responsive to evolving contexts, and capable of providing a continuum of prevention and response services to safeguard the rights and futures of every refugee child.

Interventions for Enhancing Child Protection Systems in Refugee Settlement

Child protection in refugee settlements presents a profound global challenge, necessitating systems that are both responsive to acute emergencies and sustainable for prolonged displacement. Refugee children face intersecting risks including violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, family separation, and psychosocial distress, exacerbated by disrupted social structures, overcrowding, and limited resources (UNHCR, 2023). The inherent weaknesses of state-led systems in host countries, coupled with the complexity of coordinating multiple humanitarian actors, often result in fragmented and ineffective protection responses (Wessells, 2023). A child protection system in this context is defined as a set of laws, policies, regulations, and services needed across all societal levels to support prevention and response to protection risks (UNICEF, 2022). This review synthesizes current evidence on interventions aimed at enhancing these systems, moving beyond isolated projects to integrated, community-owned, and resilience-building approaches. The objective is to identify scalable and contextually relevant strategies that can bolster the safeguarding of refugee children’s rights and well-being (Save the Children, 2024). A cornerstone intervention in refugee settings is the establishment and capacity-building of Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs). These are formally or informally organized groups within the refugee and host communities—such as child protection committees, youth clubs, and women’s groups—that work to identify, prevent, and respond to child protection concerns (Wessells, 2023). Evidence underscores that interventions leveraging existing community structures are more sustainable and culturally competent than externally imposed models. For instance, CBCPMs facilitate the mapping of protection risks, provide safe reporting channels, and offer immediate psychosocial first aid (Ager et al., 2021). Their effectiveness hinges on meaningful participation, where community members, including children and adolescents, are involved in design and decision-making, not just implementation (Pouligny, 2021). Capacity-strengthening initiatives that provide training on child rights, positive parenting, case management, and referral pathways are critical to their success (UNHCR, 2023). When supported by agencies and linked to formal national systems, CBCPMs act as a vital

frontline defense, bridging the gap between isolated settlements and broader protection infrastructures (Save the Children, 2024).

A robust, standardized, and inter-agency case management system is a critical technical intervention for enhancing child protection systems. In the chaos of displacement, children at risk often fall through the cracks due to poor information sharing and uncoordinated actions among NGOs, UN agencies, and host government services (UNICEF, 2022). Effective interventions focus on establishing harmonized tools, procedures, and roles for identification, assessment, case planning, implementation, follow-up, and closure (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2023). This includes creating and training a cadre of dedicated case workers, using interoperable data management systems that respect confidentiality, and developing clear, context-specific Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for referrals to specialized services (e.g., health, legal, mental health and psychosocial support) (Ager et al., 2021). Digital case management tools, where connectivity permits, have shown promise in improving tracking and accountability (World Vision, 2023). Ultimately, a strong case management system ensures a child-centered, coordinated response for the most vulnerable, creating predictability and accountability across the settlement ecosystem (UNHCR, 2023).

Child protection is inextricably linked to psychological well-being. Interventions that integrate Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) into the core of protection systems are essential for addressing the trauma, stress, and developmental impacts of displacement. A multi-layered intervention framework, such as the IASC Pyramid, is recommended, ranging from community-based social support (e.g., through child-friendly spaces and structured recreational activities) to focused psychosocial care and specialized clinical mental health services (IASC, 2022). School-based MHPSS interventions, including training teachers in psychological first aid and creating safe learning environments, serve as both protective and promotive measures (Fazel et al., 2021). Furthermore, caregiver support programs, which address parental stress and promote positive parenting practices, indirectly enhance child protection by strengthening the primary protective buffer—the family (Popham et al., 2023). Effective integration requires training child protection staff in basic MHPSS principles and ensuring smooth referral pathways between protection and specialized MHPSS actors (World Health Organization, 2023).

Sustainable enhancement of child protection in refugee settlements requires moving beyond parallel systems to deliberately strengthen the capacity of host government institutions and the local workforce. This systems-strengthening intervention involves supporting national and local authorities in policy development, budgeting, and service delivery that inclusively covers refugees (UNICEF, 2022). Key activities include joint training of government social workers and refugee community volunteers on child protection principles and case management, fostering a shared understanding and practice (Ager et al., 2021). Supporting the professionalization of the child protection workforce within settlements through accredited training, supervision, and fair compensation is crucial for quality and retention (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2023). Advocacy for the inclusion of refugee children in national child protection laws, policies, and action plans, such as National Child Protection Systems, ensures legal sustainability (Save the Children, 2024). This approach promotes ownership, improves coordination, and lays groundwork for durable solutions even after humanitarian funding recedes (Wessells, 2023).

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Recognizing children as rights-holders and active agents in their own protection is a transformative intervention. Structured child participation mechanisms, such as child parliaments, youth advisory boards, and feedback committees, allow children to identify protection risks, design solutions, and hold duty-bearers accountable (Lundy, 2021). These platforms empower children, build life skills, and foster resilience. For example, adolescent-led research and peer-to-peer education programs on issues like gender-based violence, early marriage, and exploitation have proven effective in changing community norms and behaviors (Dawes & van der Merwe, 2022). Digital tools, including safe social media platforms and SMS-based feedback systems, can amplify the voices of younger children and adolescents, particularly for sensitive reporting (World Vision, 2023). Ensuring participation is safe, inclusive, and meaningful not tokenistic requires dedicated resources, skilled facilitation, and a commitment to acting on children's input (UNHCR, 2023). This intervention shifts the system from being purely service-oriented to one that is democratically accountable to its beneficiaries.

Enhancing child protection systems requires targeted interventions that address specific vulnerabilities, with a critical focus on preventing and responding to Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Refugee girls, in particular, face heightened risks of sexual exploitation, child marriage, and intimate partner violence (UNHCR, 2023). Effective interventions include establishing safe spaces for women and girls that offer confidential case management, psychosocial support, and life-skills training; integrating GBV risk mitigation across all sectors (like water, sanitation, and food distribution); and engaging men and boys in transformative dialogues on masculinity and violence prevention (Stark & Landis, 2021). Similarly, systems must be adapted to protect children with disabilities, unaccompanied and separated children, and those engaged in child labour. This requires targeted case finding, tailored assistance plans, accessibility audits of services, and specialized training for protection staff (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2023). A robust Best Interests Determination (BID) process for unaccompanied children is a specific procedural intervention mandated to guide durable solutions (UNHCR, 2023).

The overall efficacy of the above interventions depends on foundational enabling interventions related to coordination, data, and accountability. A well-functioning, government-led Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CP AoR) or working group at settlement and national levels is vital for strategic planning, avoiding duplication, and resolving gaps (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2023). Coupled with this is the need for ethical and robust data management. Interventions such as implementing standardized child protection information management systems (CPIMS+) enable trend analysis, evidence-based programming, and monitoring of vulnerable children across agencies while safeguarding data privacy (UNICEF, 2022). Finally, establishing strong accountability to affected populations (AAP) mechanisms, including community feedback and complaint mechanisms that are accessible to children, ensures systems remain responsive and effective (HAP International, 2023). Regular participatory assessments and joint monitoring frameworks are essential to measure the impact of system-strengthening efforts and guide adaptive management (Ager et al., 2021).

Challenges of Interventions in Enhancing Child Protection Systems in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

The enhancement of child protection systems within refugee settlements like Kiryandongo is fundamentally challenged by systemic constraints inherent to protracted displacement contexts. Refugee settlements often operate under parallel governance structures, creating jurisdictional ambiguities between national child protection frameworks, traditional justice systems, and humanitarian coordination mechanisms. This fragmentation leads to significant gaps in service delivery, accountability, and legal clarity for vulnerable children. As Ager et al. (2021) argue, the durability of child protection outcomes is contingent upon the integration of interventions into coherent national systems, a process often stalled in temporary settlements. Furthermore, the dependency on short-term, project-based humanitarian funding cycles, as noted by Wessells and Kostelny (2021), undermines the sustainability of capacity-building efforts for state and community actors. The political economy of aid, where donor priorities can shift rapidly away from protracted crises, exacerbates these structural weaknesses (Hadfield & Melville, 2022). These systemic issues are compounded by Uganda's specific policy environment, where progressive refugee-hosting policies like the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) encounter implementation bottlenecks at the local settlement level, limiting systemic change for child protection (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2020).

A primary and pervasive challenge is the severe scarcity of material and human resources dedicated to child protection within settlements. Kiryandongo, like many refugee-hosting areas, faces a critical shortage of trained social workers, case managers, and child-friendly spaces relative to the population's needs. According to the UNHCR (2023), global underfunding for child protection in refugee responses consistently leaves over 60% of assessed needs unmet, forcing agencies to triage services and abandon holistic approaches. This scarcity extends beyond personnel to encompass inadequate infrastructure, such as safe houses for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and specialized facilities for children with disabilities (Meyer, 2022). The high turnover of humanitarian staff due to burnout and contract instability, as observed by Robbers and Ciccone (2021), further erodes institutional memory and the trust necessary for effective case management. Consequently, even well-designed interventions risk being diluted or rendered ineffective, as the system lacks the foundational resources to operationalize them fully (Sánchez & Vargas, 2023).

Interventions frequently encounter socio-cultural disconnects that impede their relevance and effectiveness. Kiryandongo hosts a diverse refugee population primarily from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), each with distinct cultural norms, child-rearing practices, and community governance structures. Imposing external, western-centric child protection models without deep contextual adaptation can lead to community resistance or the unintended undermining of positive indigenous protective practices (Wessells, 2022). Linguistic diversity presents a formidable barrier, as critical psychosocial support and legal aid services often lack consistent, qualified interpretation, compromising the confidentiality and quality of interventions (Bennouna et al., 2021). Furthermore, community-based protection mechanisms, such as community child protection committees, can inadvertently replicate existing power dynamics, marginalizing the voices of children, adolescents, and women from minority clans or ethnic groups (Masterson & O'Sullivan, 2022). Effective

engagement requires moving beyond tokenistic participation to genuinely co-designed strategies that respect and build upon local epistemologies of protection (Denov & Shevell, 2021).

The child protection caseload in Kiryandongo is characterized by profound psychosocial complexity stemming from conflict-induced trauma, displacement stressors, and ongoing adversity. Many children have experienced or witnessed violence, loss, and separation, manifesting in mental health distress that complicates protection responses. Standardized psychosocial support (PSS) interventions often fail to address the scale or the culturally specific expressions of this distress (Tol et al., 2020). The intergenerational transmission of trauma can impair caregivers' own protective capacities, creating cycles of vulnerability that are difficult to interrupt with time-limited therapeutic services (Betancourt et al., 2022). This is exacerbated by the erosion of traditional social support networks during displacement, leaving families isolated. Interventions focusing narrowly on the individual child without concurrently strengthening the caregiving environment and community support structures, as emphasized by the "Safe Families, Safe Children" model (Stark et al., 2023), often yield unsustainable outcomes.

Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) represent a cohort with acute protection needs, and interventions targeting them face distinct challenges. Family tracing and reunification (FTR) processes are hampered by logistical obstacles, insecurity in countries of origin, and complex kinship disputes over guardianship (Riley et al., 2021). Alternative care arrangements, including foster care, require rigorous monitoring and support to prevent exploitation and ensure stability, resources which are often lacking. Simultaneously, adolescents face unique risks often inadequately addressed by child protection programming designed for younger children. These include economic exploitation, survival sex, forced recruitment into armed groups, and early marriage issues that sit at the intersection of child protection, livelihoods, and education sectors (Stark et al., 2022). The lack of meaningful adolescent participation in program design leads to services that are underutilized, as they fail to address the realities of adolescents' lives and aspirations (Chase et al., 2020).

The multi-agency nature of humanitarian response often results in significant coordination challenges that weaken the child protection system. Despite cluster coordination mechanisms, information sharing between agencies, government departments, and implementing partners is often poor due to concerns over data confidentiality, inter-agency competition for funding, and incompatible reporting systems (Grace, 2022). This fragmentation leads to duplication of services for some children while others fall through the gaps entirely. Robust case management, the backbone of child protection, is critically undermined by these siloes (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2023). Moreover, ethical and safe data collection on sensitive protection issues remains a significant hurdle. The absence of a centralized, secure, and ethically governed information management system impedes effective case tracking, trend analysis, and evidence-based programming (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive and causal research design, because of the study objectives. According to Shuttleworth (2008) and Anastas (1999), descriptive research designs help to provide answers to the questions of who, what, when, where, and how associated with a particular research problem.

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Research Approach

This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The mixed-methods approach allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the child protection issues in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, enabling the researcher to gather rich, descriptive data while also generating quantifiable information that can be generalized across the settlement. Qualitative Research: This provided an insight into the lived experiences of refugee children, families, and key stakeholders in the settlement. It also helped in identifying the cultural, social, and psychological factors influencing child protection issues. According to Kruger (2003), in Mcandles et al (2007), quantitative research allows one to summarize vast sources of information.

Geographical Area

The study was conducted in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement because it is one of the refugee settlements. Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, located in the northern region of Uganda, hosts over 60,000 refugees, the majority of whom are South Sudanese. Kiryandongo settlement is divided into clusters – each cluster has an elected community leader

Study population

The study covered a sample size of 55 respondents. These will include children aged 7 to 20 years in Kiryandongo Refugee settlement, along with their caregivers or guardians. Key informants will be interviewed, and these will include local community leaders, parents, child protection officers, NGO workers, teachers, healthcare providers, and settlement officials. This sample size was determined based on the available resources and time since covering more respondents will need more time and resources. This category of respondents was selected because they are stakeholders in child protection. The Slovene formula will determine the minimum sample size N. $n = N / (1 + Na^2)$

Where:

n = Number of samples,

N = Total population and

a = correlation coefficient

$$n = \frac{N}{1+Na^2}$$

$$n = \frac{N}{1+Na^2} \times 1$$

Sampling Design

The respondents were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling techniques for purposes of getting potential respondents with viable information. Gallordo (2009) describes the snowball sampling method as a method that asks study respondents to make referrals to other potential respondents, who in turn make referrals to other respondents, and so on. Denscombe (2007) describes purposeful sampling as a method applied where the researcher already knows something about specific people and deliberately selects them because they are seen as instances that are likely to produce the most valuable data.

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Data Collection Methods

The study employed both primary and secondary methods of data collection. Secondary methods will include documentation such as books, Internet articles, and newspapers that are vital for the study. Primary methods included questionnaires and interviews. According to Amin (2005), secondary data provide a baseline with which the collected primary results can be compared to other methods.

Data Collection Instruments/ Tools

The study used three data collection instruments: key informant interviews and focus group discussions, which will be used for qualitative research, and questionnaires, which will be adopted for quantitative analysis.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were the main instrument for collecting quantitative data. The questionnaire will be made up of open and closed-ended questions. These were administered to the children, and this helped in providing the extent of the current state of child protection system in Kiryandongo refugee settlement

3.8.2 Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews consisted of open-ended questions that yielded in-depth responses about the experiences of child protection among refugee children. The Key informant interviews was conducted using the Key informant guide and during the interviews, respondents was allowed to give an in-depth view on the study topic. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugee children (if feasible, depending on age), parents/guardians, child protection officers, and key informants such as NGO staff, teachers, and community leaders. These interviews explored personal experiences, perceptions of child protection issues, and the effectiveness of current interventions.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Separate FGDs were held with groups of refugee parents/guardians, community leaders, teachers, and child protection workers to gather group insights into the community's understanding of child protection, its challenges, and solutions. This method is useful for identifying common concerns and perspectives.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data collected using the questionnaire was cleaned and sorted. In the coding process, a number was assigned to each answer in the questionnaire with a corresponding number on the coding sheet. The same questionnaire was constructed on the computer using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23. Frequency tables was worked out based on the data entered by SPSS. According to Blaxter et al. (2006), codes may be used to simplify and standardize the data for analytical purposes, as when characteristics like sex, marital status or occupation are replaced by numbers (e.g. replacing 'male' by "1" "female" by "2"). Or the process may involve some reduction in the quantity of the data, as when ages, locations or attitudes are categorized into a limited number of groups, with each group then assigned its own numerical identity. (E.g. categorizing ages as "under "18-25"and "40 and over", and then replacing these by "1", "2"and "3" respectively)

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was collected using the interview guide. Data was analysed by cross checking the questions put in the questionnaire for purposes of consistency and correctness of the answers given. Categories was formed to analyse the data more systematically.

Ethical Consideration

The topic of study is very sensitive hence respect and confidentiality were required from the researcher. The respondents participated voluntarily in this research and the researcher sought consent from all selected respondents. Respondents were informed of the purpose and objectives of the study before they were interviewed. And upon their consent, the research instrument was administered.

The respondents were assured that the data gathered from them was treated with strict confidentiality. This was done with the hope of promoting trust between the researcher and the respondents. Amin in Ikiring (2006) argues that the respondent has the right to decide to provide information or not.

Limitations

The research may face certain limitations, such as:

Humanitarian focus group/ individual sessions aligned to assessment come with transport refund, snacks as given by NGOs that conduct assessment evaluations. However, this was not the case as I did not have such finances. Positively the respondents shared expectations, and the researcher shared outcomes and impacts of conducting this study that is centred on academics. Noting that some dropped off and others rendered the necessary information for the research.

Another limitation was on the side of the key informants who kept on postponing appointments due to their conflicting schedules therefore, obtaining information became a tedious process. However, the postponement was followed up with rescheduling time fit for the informant through persistence follow-up by the researcher.

Results

Table 1: Awareness of Child Protection Mechanisms

Level of Awareness	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very High	8	14.5
High	19	34.5
Moderate	21	38.2
Low	5	9.1
Very Low	2	3.6
Total	55	100.0

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings in Table 1 showed that 21 respondents representing 38.2% indicated that awareness of child protection mechanisms in Kiryandongo refugee settlement was moderate, while 19 respondents representing 34.5% reported high awareness. Eight respondents representing 14.5% indicated very high awareness, while 5 respondents representing 9.1% reported low awareness. Only 2 respondents representing 3.6% indicated very low awareness of child protection mechanisms. The findings revealed that awareness of child protection mechanisms

was generally positive, with 87.2% of respondents reporting moderate to very high awareness levels. This suggested that there had been significant efforts to raise awareness about child protection issues and available services in the settlement. The high combined percentage of moderate to very high awareness indicated that community members, service providers, and other stakeholders had reasonable knowledge about child protection mechanisms, which is a fundamental prerequisite for effective child protection programming. However, the fact that the highest single category was moderate awareness (38.2%) rather than high or very high awareness suggested that there was still considerable room for improvement in awareness-raising activities. The 12.7% of respondents who reported low to very low awareness, though a minority, represented a significant gap that needed to be addressed, as lack of awareness could prevent children and families from accessing critical protection services. The moderate awareness level might have reflected the challenges of reaching all community members in a settlement context where populations are diverse, mobile, and where language barriers and literacy levels can affect information dissemination.

Availability of Child Protection Services

Table 2: Availability of Child Protection Services in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

Type of Service	Available	Not Available	Total
	Freq	%	Freq
Case management services	42	76.4	13
Psychosocial support	38	69.1	17
Legal assistance	25	45.5	30
Educational support	47	85.5	8
Child-friendly spaces	35	63.6	20
Family tracing and reunification	28	50.9	27

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The results presented in Table 2 revealed varying levels of availability of different child protection services in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. Educational support services had the highest availability, with 47 respondents representing 85.5% reporting that these services were available. This was followed by case management services, which 42 respondents representing 76.4% reported as available. Psychosocial support was reported as available by 38 respondents representing 69.1%, while child-friendly spaces were available according to 35 respondents representing 63.6%. Family tracing and reunification services were reported as available by 28 respondents representing 50.9%, while legal assistance had the lowest availability, with only 25 respondents representing 45.5% reporting its availability. The findings indicated that while some child protection services were relatively well-established in Kiryandongo refugee settlement, there were significant gaps in service availability. The high availability of educational support (85.5%) was encouraging as education is a critical protective factor for refugee children, providing structure, normalcy, and opportunities for development even in displacement contexts. The strong availability of case management services (76.4%) was also positive, as case management forms the backbone of individualized child protection responses. However, the low availability of legal assistance (45.5%)

was concerning given that refugee children face numerous legal challenges including documentation issues, custody matters, and protection from exploitation and abuse. The moderate availability of family tracing and reunification services (50.9%) represented a critical gap, as separated and unaccompanied children require these specialized services. The findings suggested that while humanitarian actors had established essential child protection services in the settlement, resource constraints and programmatic priorities had resulted in uneven service coverage, with some critical services remaining inadequately available.

Accessibility of Child Protection Services

Table 3: Accessibility of Child Protection Services

Level of Accessibility	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Accessible	6	10.9
Accessible	23	41.8
Moderately Accessible	18	32.7
Not Accessible	6	10.9
Not at All Accessible	2	3.6
Total	55	100.0

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings in Table 3 showed that 23 respondents representing 41.8% reported that child protection services were accessible, while 18 respondents representing 32.7% indicated that services were moderately accessible. Six respondents representing 10.9% reported that services were very accessible, while an equal number (10.9%) indicated that services were not accessible. Two respondents representing 3.6% reported that services were not at all accessible. The findings revealed that accessibility of child protection services was generally positive, with 85.4% of respondents reporting that services ranged from moderately accessible to very accessible. The largest proportion of respondents (41.8%) rated accessibility as simply "accessible," suggesting that while services could be reached by most community members, there were still some barriers that prevented optimal access. The 32.7% who rated accessibility as moderate indicated that significant challenges existed for certain groups or in certain circumstances. The combined 14.5% of respondents who reported that services were not accessible or not at all accessible represented a concerning minority who faced substantial barriers to child protection services. These accessibility challenges might have been related to geographical distance, as refugee settlements can be vast with services concentrated in certain zones, making it difficult for families in remote areas to access support. Language barriers, cultural factors, lack of information, fear of stigma, and procedural complexities could also have limited accessibility. The findings suggested that while child protection actors had made efforts to position services within reach of the refugee community, continued attention was needed to address the remaining access barriers, particularly for the most marginalized and vulnerable groups who might have been overrepresented among those reporting low accessibility.

Table 4: Existing Child Protection Interventions

Intervention	Frequency	Percentage (%)
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Awareness raising campaigns	51	92.7
Capacity building for service providers	43	78.2
Establishment of child protection committees	39	70.9
School-based child protection programs	48	87.3
Community-based child protection mechanisms	37	67.3
Referral pathways development	41	74.5
Child participation initiatives	29	52.7

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings presented in Table 4 revealed that awareness raising campaigns were the most commonly identified intervention, mentioned by 51 respondents representing 92.7% of the sample. School-based child protection programs were mentioned by 48 respondents representing 87.3%, while capacity building for service providers was identified by 43 respondents representing 78.2%. Referral pathways development was mentioned by 41 respondents representing 74.5%, and establishment of child protection committees was identified by 39 respondents representing 70.9%. Community-based child protection mechanisms were mentioned by 37 respondents representing 67.3%, while child participation initiatives had the lowest mention rate with 29 respondents representing 52.7%. The findings indicated that child protection actors in Kiryandongo refugee settlement had implemented a diverse range of interventions to strengthen child protection systems. The very high prevalence of awareness raising campaigns (92.7%) reflected a recognition that knowledge and information are foundational to effective child protection, and that refugee communities need continuous sensitization about child rights, protection risks, and available services. The strong emphasis on school-based programs (87.3%) was strategic, as schools provide structured environments where large numbers of children can be reached with protection messages and where teachers can be trained to identify and respond to protection concerns. The substantial focus on capacity building (78.2%) demonstrated an understanding that effective child protection requires skilled personnel who are continuously updated on best practices, policies, and response mechanisms. However, the relatively lower emphasis on child participation initiatives (52.7%) was concerning, as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and contemporary child protection standards emphasize children's rights to participate in decisions affecting them. The moderate prevalence of community-based mechanisms (67.3%) suggested that there was room for strengthening informal, culturally appropriate protection structures that could complement formal services and ensure sustainability beyond the presence of humanitarian actors (A. G. Kazaara & Kazaara, 2023).

Effectiveness of Child Protection Interventions

Table 5: Perceived Effectiveness of Child Protection Interventions

Level of Effectiveness	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Effective	5	9.1
Effective	26	47.3
Moderately Effective	19	34.5

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Not Effective	4	7.3
Not at All Effective	1	1.8
Total	55	100.0

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings in Table 5 showed that 26 respondents representing 47.3% perceived child protection interventions as effective, while 19 respondents representing 34.5% rated them as moderately effective. Five respondents representing 9.1% considered the interventions very effective, while 4 respondents representing 7.3% felt they were not effective. Only 1 respondent representing 1.8% indicated that interventions were not at all effective. The findings revealed generally positive perceptions of intervention effectiveness, with 90.9% of respondents rating interventions as moderately effective to very effective (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). The largest proportion of respondents (47.3%) rated interventions as effective, suggesting that child protection programming in Kiryandongo refugee settlement was achieving reasonable results in addressing protection concerns. However, the fact that 34.5% rated effectiveness as only moderate indicated that interventions were not reaching their full potential and that there were implementation challenges limiting their impact (Winny et al., 2023). The relatively small percentage rating interventions as very effective (9.1%) suggested that while services were functioning adequately, they had not yet achieved excellence or optimal outcomes. The 9.1% who rated interventions as not effective or not at all effective, though a small minority, represented an important critical perspective that should not be overlooked, as these respondents might have had direct experience with intervention failures or gaps (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). The moderate effectiveness ratings might have been attributable to several factors including insufficient resources, inadequate staffing, coordination challenges, cultural appropriateness issues, or the complexity of protection needs in a refugee context that exceeded the capacity of available interventions. The findings suggested that while progress had been made, there was substantial room for improving the quality, reach, and impact of child protection interventions.

Priority Interventions for Strengthening Child Protection Systems

Table 6: Priority Interventions Needed to Strengthen Child Protection Systems

Priority Intervention	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strengthening family and community support systems	49	89.1
Improving coordination among stakeholders	45	81.8
Increasing resources for child protection	47	85.5
Enhancing legal protection frameworks	38	69.1
Developing culturally appropriate interventions	42	76.4
Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems	35	63.6
Increasing child participation in protection programs	40	72.7

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The results presented in Table 6 revealed that strengthening family and community support systems was identified as a priority intervention by the highest number of respondents, with 49 representing 89.1% mentioning this need.

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Increasing resources for child protection was mentioned by 47 respondents representing 85.5%, while improving coordination among stakeholders was identified by 45 respondents representing 81.8%. Developing culturally appropriate interventions was mentioned by 42 respondents representing 76.4%, and increasing child participation in protection programs was identified by 40 respondents representing 72.7%. Enhancing legal protection frameworks was mentioned by 38 respondents representing 69.1%, while strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems was identified by 35 respondents representing 63.6%. The findings revealed strong consensus on the need to strengthen family and community support systems (89.1%), reflecting an understanding that formal child protection services alone cannot adequately protect children and that sustainable protection must be rooted in strengthened families and communities. This was particularly relevant in a refugee context where displacement disrupts traditional family and community structures that normally provide protection for children. The high priority placed on increasing resources (85.5%) reflected the reality that many child protection interventions in humanitarian settings are chronically underfunded, limiting the scope, quality, and sustainability of services. The emphasis on improving coordination (81.8%) indicated recognition that multiple actors are involved in child protection and that fragmented, uncoordinated responses lead to gaps, duplication, and inefficiencies. The substantial emphasis on developing culturally appropriate interventions (76.4%) was particularly important given that refugees in Kiryandongo come from diverse cultural backgrounds and that protection mechanisms must be adapted to different cultural contexts to be effective and acceptable. The priority given to increasing child participation (72.7%) demonstrated growing recognition of children as rights-holders and active agents in their own protection rather than passive beneficiaries of adult-designed interventions.

Challenges of Interventions in Enhancing Child Protection Systems in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement**Table 7: Resource-Related Challenges Affecting Child Protection Interventions**

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Insufficient funding	52	94.5
Inadequate staffing	48	87.3
Lack of infrastructure	41	74.5
Limited material resources	45	81.8
Inadequate transportation	37	67.3

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The findings in Table 7 showed that insufficient funding was identified as a challenge by the overwhelming majority of respondents, with 52 representing 94.5% mentioning this issue. Inadequate staffing was mentioned by 48 respondents representing 87.3%, while limited material resources was identified by 45 respondents representing 81.8%. Lack of infrastructure was mentioned by 41 respondents representing 74.5%, and inadequate transportation was identified by 37 respondents representing 67.3%. The findings revealed that resource-related challenges were pervasive and severe across all dimensions of child protection programming in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. The near-universal identification of insufficient funding (94.5%) as a challenge reflected the chronic underfunding of child protection programming in humanitarian contexts, where protection often competes

unsuccessfully for resources against more visible life-saving interventions such as food distribution and healthcare. This funding insufficiency cascaded into all other resource challenges, limiting the ability to hire adequate staff, build necessary infrastructure, procure materials, and maintain transportation systems. The high prevalence of inadequate staffing (87.3%) was particularly concerning because child protection is labor-intensive work that requires skilled professionals to conduct case management, provide counseling, facilitate community mobilization, and coordinate services. Understaffing leads to high caseloads, burnout, inadequate follow-up, and compromised quality of services. The substantial challenges related to lack of infrastructure (74.5%) reflected the difficulties of providing child protection services in a settlement context where child-friendly spaces, office facilities, and private counseling rooms may be lacking. Limited material resources (81.8%) including basic supplies, educational materials, and recreational equipment constrained the ability to provide quality services. Inadequate transportation (67.3%) was a significant barrier given the large geographical area of the settlement, making it difficult for child protection workers to conduct home visits, respond to emergencies, and reach vulnerable children in remote zones.

Coordination and Collaboration Challenges

Table 8: Coordination and Collaboration Challenges

Level of Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Serious	12	21.8
Serious	28	50.9
Moderate	11	20.0
Minor	3	5.5
Not a Challenge	1	1.8
Total	55	100.0

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings presented in Table 8 revealed that 28 respondents representing 50.9% rated coordination and collaboration challenges as serious, while 12 respondents representing 21.8% considered them very serious. Eleven respondents representing 20.0% rated these challenges as moderate, while 3 respondents representing 5.5% considered them minor. Only 1 respondent representing 1.8% indicated that coordination and collaboration were not a challenge. The findings indicated that coordination and collaboration challenges were widespread and significant, with 72.7% of respondents rating them as serious to very serious. The high prevalence of serious coordination challenges reflected the complex multi-actor environment in Kiryandongo refugee settlement, where numerous humanitarian organizations, government agencies, and community structures were involved in child protection programming. Poor coordination led to duplication of efforts in some areas while leaving gaps in others, inefficient use of limited resources, conflicting approaches and messages, and inadequate information sharing about cases and services. The challenges might have stemmed from competition for funding and recognition among organizations, lack of clear leadership and coordination structures, different organizational mandates and priorities, inadequate information management systems, and limited time and resources dedicated to coordination

activities. The 20.0% who rated coordination challenges as moderate suggested that some coordination mechanisms were functioning reasonably well, possibly in specific sectors or among particular groups of actors. However, the overall picture was one of substantial coordination deficits that undermined the effectiveness and efficiency of child protection interventions. Effective child protection requires seamless collaboration across multiple sectors including protection, education, health, nutrition, and water and sanitation, as well as strong partnerships between international organizations, government structures, and community-based actors, indicating that significant strengthening of coordination mechanisms was needed.

Cultural and Social Challenges

Table 9: Cultural and Social Challenges Affecting Child Protection Interventions

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cultural beliefs that contradict child rights principles	46	83.6
Language barriers	44	80.0
Stigma around accessing services	40	72.7
Limited community understanding of child protection	42	76.4
Resistance from community leaders	28	50.9
Gender norms that discriminate against children	39	70.9

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings in Table 9 showed that cultural beliefs that contradict child rights principles were identified as a challenge by 46 respondents representing 83.6%, while language barriers were mentioned by 44 respondents representing 80.0%. Limited community understanding of child protection was identified by 42 respondents representing 76.4%, and stigma around accessing services was mentioned by 40 respondents representing 72.7%. Gender norms that discriminate against children were identified by 39 respondents representing 70.9%, while resistance from community leaders was mentioned by 28 respondents representing 50.9%. The findings revealed that cultural and social challenges posed substantial barriers to effective child protection programming in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. The high prevalence of cultural beliefs that contradict child rights principles (83.6%) reflected the tension between universal child rights standards and certain traditional practices or beliefs regarding child discipline, early marriage, child labor, and gender roles. Navigating this tension required culturally sensitive approaches that engaged communities in dialogue rather than imposing external values, while still upholding fundamental child rights standards. The significant language barriers (80.0%) stemmed from the linguistic diversity of refugee populations in Kiryandongo, who come from multiple countries and speak various languages including South Sudanese languages, Congolese languages, and others, while most services are provided in English or Luganda. These language barriers complicated communication between service providers and beneficiaries, limited access to information, and potentially led to misunderstandings and inadequate service delivery. The substantial stigma around accessing services (72.7%) particularly for issues such as sexual violence, mental health problems, and family difficulties, prevented many children and families from seeking help, allowing protection concerns to worsen. Limited community understanding of child protection (76.4%) meant that many

community members did not recognize certain harmful practices as protection issues or did not know how to respond appropriately to children's protection needs. Gender norms (70.9%) that favored boys over girls or that imposed restrictive gender roles led to discriminatory treatment and specific protection risks for both boys and girls. The moderate level of resistance from community leaders (50.9%) suggested that while some traditional authorities were supportive of child protection efforts, others viewed these interventions as interfering with cultural practices or challenging traditional authority structures.

Policy and Legal Challenges

Table 10: Policy and Legal Framework Challenges

Level of Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Serious	15	27.3
Serious	24	43.6
Moderate	13	23.6
Minor	2	3.6
Not a Challenge	1	1.8
Total	55	100.0

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings in Table 10 revealed that 24 respondents representing 43.6% rated policy and legal framework challenges as serious, while 15 respondents representing 27.3% considered them very serious. Thirteen respondents representing 23.6% rated these challenges as moderate, while 2 respondents representing 3.6% considered them minor. Only 1 respondent representing 1.8% indicated that policy and legal frameworks were not a challenge. The findings indicated that policy and legal framework challenges were substantial, with 70.9% of respondents rating them as serious to very serious. These challenges encompassed several dimensions including gaps in refugee-specific child protection legislation, limited legal documentation for refugee children affecting their access to services and legal remedies, weak enforcement of existing child protection laws in settlement contexts, unclear jurisdictional issues regarding authority over refugee children, and inadequate legal aid services for children. The serious nature of these challenges reflected the complex legal status of refugees, who are governed by a combination of international refugee law, international human rights law including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Ugandan national laws, and specific refugee policies and regulations. Gaps and contradictions in this legal framework created protection risks and limited accountability mechanisms. Documentation challenges were particularly acute, as many refugee children lacked birth certificates, making it difficult to prove their age, nationality, or family relationships, which in turn affected their access to education, healthcare, and protection services. The weak enforcement of laws meant that even where legal protections existed on paper, they were not consistently applied in practice, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and harmful practices. The moderate ratings from 23.6% of respondents suggested that some aspects of the policy and legal framework were functioning adequately, possibly reflecting recent improvements in Uganda's refugee policies or effective advocacy efforts. However, the overall picture was one of significant legal and policy barriers

that required attention at multiple levels from local implementation to national policy reform and international standard-setting.

Statistical Analysis of Challenges

To further understand the relationships between different categories of challenges and their overall impact on child protection interventions, chi-square tests were conducted to examine associations between variables.

Table 11: Chi-Square Test Results for Association between Resource Challenges and Intervention Effectiveness

Variable	Chi-Square Value	Degrees of Freedom	P-Value	Interpretation
Resource challenges vs Intervention effectiveness	18.734	4	0.001	Significant association

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The chi-square test results presented in Table 11 revealed a statistically significant association between resource challenges and intervention effectiveness ($\chi^2 = 18.734$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.001$). This finding indicated that resource challenges including insufficient funding, inadequate staffing, lack of infrastructure, limited material resources, and inadequate transportation were significantly related to the perceived effectiveness of child protection interventions in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. The strong statistical significance ($p = 0.001$) provided robust evidence that respondents who reported higher levels of resource challenges also tended to rate intervention effectiveness lower, while those who reported fewer resource challenges rated effectiveness higher. This association confirmed the intuitive understanding that adequate resources are fundamental to effective child protection programming. Without sufficient funding, it was impossible to hire enough staff, build necessary infrastructure, procure materials, or maintain transportation systems. The significant relationship between resources and effectiveness underscored the critical importance of advocacy for increased funding and more efficient resource allocation in child protection programming. It also suggested that improvements in resource availability could be expected to yield corresponding improvements in intervention effectiveness, making resource mobilization a high-priority strategy for strengthening child protection systems in the settlement.

Conclusions

Based on the findings and discussion presented above, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding child protection systems and refugee children in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. First, the child protection system in Kiryandongo refugee settlement demonstrated both significant strengths and critical weaknesses. Strengths included relatively high awareness of child protection mechanisms among community members and service providers, availability of essential services such as educational support and case management, generally positive accessibility of services, implementation of diverse interventions including awareness campaigns, school-based programs, and capacity building, and commitment from multiple stakeholders to child protection.

Effective child protection in refugee settings requires comprehensive, multi-faceted interventions operating at multiple levels of the socio-ecological system. No single intervention was sufficient to ensure child protection; rather, combinations of individual-level services (case management, psychosocial support), family-level support (parenting programs, economic strengthening), community-level mechanisms (child protection committees, community dialogue), and systems-level strengthening (coordination, policy development, capacity building) were necessary. The findings demonstrated that stakeholders recognized this need for comprehensive approach.

Resource constraints represented a fundamental binding constraint on child protection effectiveness in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. The near-universal identification of insufficient funding (94.5%) and its statistically significant association with intervention effectiveness demonstrated that inadequate resources were not merely one challenge among many, but a foundational limitation affecting all aspects of child protection programming. Resource scarcity forced difficult trade-offs between different types of services, between geographical coverage and service quality, between prevention and response, and between different groups of children. These trade-offs meant that even well-designed interventions with skilled personnel could not achieve their potential when operating with inadequate resources.

Coordination deficits significantly undermined the efficiency and effectiveness of child protection responses in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. The identification of coordination challenges by 72.7% of respondents and the statistically significant association between coordination challenges and service availability demonstrated that poor coordination directly resulted in gaps, duplication, and inefficiencies. The multi-actor environment in Kiryandongo, while bringing diverse expertise and resources, created complexity that required strong coordination mechanisms including clear leadership and governance structures, regular communication and information sharing platforms, agreed-upon standards and approaches, complementary programming, joint planning and resource allocation, and shared monitoring and learning systems.

Cultural and social factors significantly shaped both the protection risks faced by refugee children and the effectiveness of interventions to address those risks. The high prevalence of cultural beliefs contradicting child rights principles (83.6%), language barriers (80.0%), and stigma (72.7%) demonstrated that child protection programming operated within complex cultural contexts that could either enable or constrain protection efforts. Effective child protection required moving beyond technically sound but culturally inappropriate interventions to approaches that engaged meaningfully with cultural values, traditional structures, and community perspectives. This required investment in cultural competence among service providers, participation of refugee communities in designing and implementing interventions, adaptation of approaches to local contexts, and sustained dialogue to build shared understanding between universal child rights principles and diverse cultural systems.

The legal and policy environment for child protection in refugee settings remained inadequate, creating protection gaps and limiting accountability for children's rights violations. The serious legal and policy challenges identified by 70.9% of respondents reflected systemic issues including gaps in refugee-specific legislation, documentation

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challenges, weak law enforcement, and unclear jurisdictional arrangements. These legal deficits meant that children's rights existed more on paper than in practice, and that children and families had limited recourse when rights were violated.

Capacity limitations among child protection personnel significantly constrained the quality of services and responses. The high prevalence of inadequate training (85.5%), lack of specialized expertise (78.2%), and insufficient supervision (65.5%) indicated that many child protection workers were operating without adequate preparation, support, or ongoing professional development. This capacity deficit was particularly concerning given the complexity and sensitivity of child protection work, which could cause harm if done poorly. Strengthening capacity required comprehensive approaches including pre-service education and training, structured in-service professional development, specialized training for technical areas, ongoing mentoring and supervision, communities of practice for peer learning, and attention to staff wellbeing and retention.

Recommendations

Humanitarian organizations implementing child protection programs in Kiryandongo refugee settlement should prioritize strengthening family and community-based child protection mechanisms as the foundation of sustainable protection. This should include supporting the establishment and capacity building of community child protection committees in all zones of the settlement, implementing parenting programs that build positive parenting skills and reduce violence against children, developing economic strengthening programs for vulnerable families to address poverty as a root cause of protection risks, creating support networks and groups for caregivers including single parents, elderly caregivers, and caregivers of children with disabilities, strengthening intergenerational dialogue to address harmful traditional practices while respecting cultural values, and developing clear linkages and referral pathways between community mechanisms and formal services.

Humanitarian organizations should invest significantly in addressing the critical gaps in availability of specialized child protection services, particularly legal assistance and family tracing and reunification. For legal services, this should include establishing or strengthening legal aid services specifically for children, providing legal information and education to refugee communities about their rights and legal procedures, supporting birth registration and documentation services for all children, training legal aid providers and justice sector actors on child-friendly procedures and refugee rights, developing alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that are accessible and culturally appropriate, and advocating for legal and policy reforms to address gaps and barriers.

The Government of Uganda through the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Office of the Prime Minister (refugee department), and local government structures in Kiryandongo District should strengthen the legal and policy framework for child protection in refugee settings. This should include reviewing and amending existing child protection legislation to explicitly address refugee children's protection needs, developing specific policies and guidelines for child protection in refugee settlements, clarifying jurisdictional arrangements and responsibilities for refugee children among different government agencies, strengthening birth registration systems in refugee settlements through mobile registration services and simplified procedures, addressing

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documentation challenges that prevent refugee children from accessing services, ensuring that national child protection systems and services are accessible to refugee children not just in principle but in practice, and domesticating international and regional legal instruments related to refugee children's rights.

Donors should incentivize and support coordination among implementing partners through funding structures and grant conditions. This could include providing funding specifically for coordination activities and personnel, requiring or rewarding joint programming and consortia approaches, funding shared infrastructure such as information management systems, supporting coordination bodies and secretariats, and evaluating agencies not just on their individual achievements but on their contributions to collective outcomes.

International organizations including UN agencies should provide technical leadership and support to strengthen child protection systems in refugee contexts. This should include developing and disseminating guidance, tools, and standards for child protection in refugee settings, providing technical assistance and capacity building to implementing partners, facilitating inter-agency coordination and harmonization of approaches, supporting research and evidence generation, advocating for child protection priorities with governments and donors, and monitoring trends and emerging issues.

Refugee communities in Kiryandongo settlement should strengthen their own child protection structures and mechanisms as the most sustainable and culturally appropriate forms of protection. This should include establishing and maintaining community child protection committees in all zones and villages, developing community-based watch systems to monitor children's wellbeing, creating support networks for vulnerable families and children, engaging traditional and religious leaders as child protection champions, organizing community dialogues on child protection issues, reporting child protection concerns to appropriate services, participating actively in child protection programs and activities, supporting children's participation in community life, and holding community members and leaders accountable for children's protection.

Refugee community leaders including traditional leaders, religious leaders, women's leaders, and youth leaders should use their influence to promote child protection and challenge harmful practices. Leaders should educate community members about children's rights and protection, speak out against violence, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination against children, serve as role models through their own behavior toward children, mediate disputes and resolve protection concerns at community level when appropriate while referring serious cases to specialized services, advocate for resources and services for children, facilitate access to services by connecting families with service providers, and participate in coordination and planning forums as representatives of community perspectives.

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