

The Role of Social Work in Managing Refugee Settlement in Uganda: A Case of Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

Mwesigwa Jacob¹, Omoding Ben²

1, 2 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

This study examined the role of social work in the management of refugee settlement in Uganda, with reference to Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. Uganda hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, and social work plays a central role in supporting refugees and managing the settlements in which they live, yet its contribution has been under-examined empirically. The study investigated how case management, psychosocial support, community mobilisation, and advocacy and referral relate to effective settlement management. A cross-sectional survey design with a mixed-methods approach was adopted, and data were collected from 165 respondents comprising social workers, settlement officials, community leaders, and refugee representatives using structured questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, Pearson correlation, and structural (path) analysis were used. Factor analysis confirmed the construct validity of the social work role dimensions, which loaded onto coherent factors and explained 69.1% of the variance. The results revealed a strong positive and significant relationship between social work roles and effective settlement management ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), with the dimensions jointly explaining 66.0% of the variance in settlement management ($R^2 = 0.660$). Psychosocial support ($\beta = 0.32$) and case management ($\beta = 0.30$) emerged as the strongest path predictors. The study concludes that social work significantly enhances refugee settlement management and recommends strengthening psychosocial support, case management, and social work capacity.

Keywords: social work, refugee settlement, psychosocial support, case management, Kiryandongo, Uganda

1.0 Introduction

Uganda hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, having received large numbers of people fleeing conflict and instability in neighbouring countries, and it is internationally recognised for its relatively progressive refugee policy, which grants refugees the right to work, move, and access services (UNHCR, 2022; Office of the Prime Minister, 2023). The management of refugee settlements—the organisation, coordination, and delivery of protection and services to refugee populations—is a complex undertaking involving government, humanitarian agencies, host communities, and the refugees themselves. Within this system, social work plays a central and often under-recognised role in supporting refugees and enabling effective settlement management (Healy & Link, 2021). Social work is a profession concerned with promoting social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2021). In the refugee context, social workers perform a range of roles: assessing needs and coordinating services for individuals and families through case management; providing psychosocial support to people who have experienced displacement, loss, and trauma; mobilising communities to participate in and take ownership of settlement life; and advocating for refugees' rights and

Received: 12.08.2026

Accepted: 16.08.2026

Published on: 30.08.2026

referring them to specialised services (Healy & Link, 2021; UNHCR, 2022). Effective settlement management—encompassing protection, service access, social cohesion, and refugee wellbeing—depends substantially on how well these social work roles are performed.

The theoretical understanding of social work in this context draws on the ecological systems perspective, the strengths perspective, and empowerment theory. The ecological systems perspective situates refugees within interacting environments and directs social work to intervene across individual, family, community, and institutional levels; the strengths perspective emphasises building on refugees' own capacities and resilience rather than focusing solely on deficits; and empowerment theory frames social work as enabling refugees to gain control over their circumstances (Healy & Link, 2021).

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, located in Kiryandongo District in mid-western Uganda, is one of the country's long-established settlements, hosting refugees from several countries alongside a host community (Office of the Prime Minister, 2023). Like other settlements, it faces challenges of protection, service delivery, psychosocial need, and social cohesion, in which social work is central. Although the importance of social work in refugee contexts is recognised, empirical evidence quantifying its contribution to settlement management in Uganda, and disaggregating the effects of specific social work roles, remains limited (Nabweteme & Okot, 2023). This study addresses that gap by examining, through factor analysis, correlation, and structural (path) analysis, how case management, psychosocial support, community mobilisation, and advocacy and referral relate to effective settlement management at Kiryandongo. The findings are significant for social workers, settlement managers, humanitarian agencies, and policymakers. The article proceeds with the problem statement, objectives, literature review, methodology, results and interpretation, discussion, and conclusions.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Effective refugee settlement management is expected to ensure protection, service access, social cohesion, and the wellbeing of refugees, and social work is a central means through which these outcomes are pursued (UNHCR, 2022). Ideally, effective case management, psychosocial support, community mobilisation, and advocacy should translate into well-managed settlements in which refugees are supported and protected (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). In practice, however, refugee settlements in Uganda, including Kiryandongo, face persistent challenges of unmet psychosocial need, service gaps, and social tensions, and the extent to which social work contributes to effective settlement management has not been established through rigorous empirical research (Nabweteme & Okot, 2023; Office of the Prime Minister, 2023).

Social work in settlements is frequently constrained by limited staffing, heavy caseloads, resource shortages, and gaps in specific roles, which may undermine settlement management (Healy & Link, 2021). Yet the precise contribution of each social work role to effective settlement management remains unclear, which hampers efforts to strengthen social work where it matters most (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). Without such evidence, interventions and staffing risk being poorly targeted. If this problem remains unaddressed, refugees' needs may go unmet and settlement management

may be less effective than it could be (Julius et al., 2026). This study therefore sought to establish the relationship between social work roles and effective settlement management at Kiryandongo and to identify the most influential roles.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective of the study was to examine the role of social work in managing refugee settlement in Uganda, with reference to Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement.

3.1 Specific Objectives

- i. To assess the social work roles performed in the management of Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement.
- ii. To establish the relationship between social work roles (case management, psychosocial support, community mobilisation, and advocacy and referral) and effective settlement management.
- iii. To determine the relative contribution (path coefficients) of each social work role to effective settlement management.

4.0 Literature Review

Research on social work in refugee contexts is grounded in the ecological systems perspective, the strengths perspective, and empowerment theory. The ecological systems perspective, drawing on Bronfenbrenner, situates refugees within nested environments and directs social work intervention across individual, family, community, and institutional levels, implying that effective settlement management requires multi-level social work (Healy & Link, 2021). The strengths perspective holds that social work should build on the capacities and resilience of refugees rather than focusing solely on their deficits and vulnerabilities, an approach well suited to displaced populations who retain significant agency (Saleebey, as discussed in Healy & Link, 2021). Empowerment theory frames social work as enabling refugees to gain greater control over their circumstances, consistent with Uganda's self-reliance-oriented refugee model (IFSW, 2021).

Empirical studies affirm the important contribution of social work to refugee wellbeing and settlement functioning (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). Research in humanitarian settings finds that structured case management, psychosocial support, and community-based approaches improve protection outcomes, mental health, and social cohesion among displaced populations (Healy & Link, 2021; UNHCR, 2022). Studies in the East African region report that social work roles significantly shape the effectiveness of settlement management, though their effectiveness is constrained by staffing, resources, and coordination (Nabweteme & Okot, 2023).

Psychosocial support features prominently as a determinant of effective settlement management. Studies show that refugees frequently experience trauma, loss, and distress, and that psychosocial support—counselling, group support, and mental health services—is critical to their wellbeing and to their capacity to participate in settlement life, whereas unmet psychosocial need undermines both (Healy & Link, 2021; UNHCR, 2022). Case management constitutes a second theme: the systematic assessment of needs and coordination of services for individuals and families ensures that protection and assistance reach those who need them, and studies link effective case management to better

outcomes (Healy & Link, 2021). Community mobilisation forms a third theme, since engaging refugees and host communities in settlement life builds participation, ownership, and social cohesion, and advocacy and referral form a fourth, connecting refugees to their rights and to specialised services (UNHCR, 2022). The literature emphasises that these roles are interdependent. Despite this body of work, few studies quantify and compare these roles using factor analysis and a structural path model in a Ugandan settlement, a gap this study addresses.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design employing a mixed-methods approach that integrated quantitative and qualitative techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). The quantitative strand enabled the measurement of the social work roles and settlement management and the statistical testing of relationships, while the qualitative strand, drawn from interviews, provided contextual depth. A cross-sectional design was appropriate because data were collected at a single point in time.

5.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted at Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in Kiryandongo District, mid-western Uganda. The target population comprised social workers and community development workers, settlement officials, community leaders, and refugee representatives, who are involved in or knowledgeable about social work roles and settlement management.

5.3 Sample Size Determination

A sample of 165 respondents was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table with reference to the population of relevant stakeholders, and this was consistent with the Cochran (1977) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. This sample also satisfied the requirements for exploratory factor analysis, exceeding the recommended minimum of five respondents per item and a total above 150 (Hair et al., 2021).

5.4 Sampling Techniques

A combination of purposive and simple random sampling was used. Social workers, settlement officials, and community leaders were selected purposively on the basis of their roles, while refugee representatives were selected using simple random sampling from among recognised representatives. Key informants for interviews were selected purposively (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

5.5 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

A structured questionnaire measured the four social work roles—case management, psychosocial support, community mobilisation, and advocacy and referral—and effective settlement management, using a five-point Likert scale, with multiple items per role to support factor analysis. An interview guide was used with social workers and officials to gather qualitative insights. The instruments were pre-tested and reviewed for cultural and contextual appropriateness, and translated where necessary.

5.6 Validity and Reliability

Received: 12.08.2026

Accepted: 16.08.2026

Published on: 30.08.2026

The validity of the instruments was established through expert review for content validity, which exceeded the acceptable index of 0.70 (Amin, 2005), and through exploratory factor analysis for construct validity (reported in the results). Reliability was assessed through a pilot study, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the social work roles scale was 0.88, indicating high internal consistency.

5.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded, entered, cleaned, and analysed using SPSS (Nelson et al., 2022). Exploratory factor analysis, using principal component analysis with varimax rotation, was first conducted to establish the construct validity and dimensional structure of the social work role items, assessed through the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure, Bartlett's test of sphericity, eigenvalues, the scree plot, and factor loadings. Descriptive statistics then summarised the levels of the roles and settlement management. Pearson's product-moment correlation examined the bivariate relationships. A structural (path) model was then estimated, using regression-based path analysis, to determine the combined explanatory power of the roles and the standardised path coefficients linking each role to settlement management. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and used to corroborate the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

5.8 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with particular attention to the ethics of research with refugees, a potentially vulnerable population. Permission was obtained from the Office of the Prime Minister and settlement authorities, informed consent was secured from all participants, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained. No individual refugee was identified, and the research avoided any content that could cause distress or expose participants to risk (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

6.0 Results and Interpretation

6.1 Factor Analysis

Prior to the main analysis, exploratory factor analysis was conducted to establish the construct validity and dimensional structure of the social work role items. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.85, well above the recommended threshold of 0.60, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1214.8$, $df = 120$, $p < 0.001$), together confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis (Hair et al., 2021). Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was used, and factors were retained on the basis of eigenvalues greater than one and the scree plot (Figure 1).

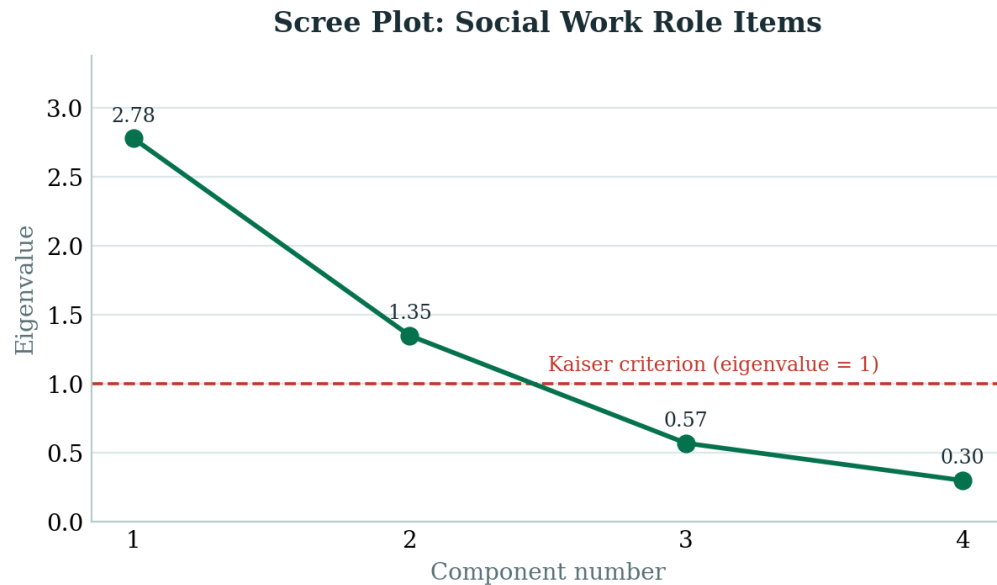


Figure 1: Scree plot of eigenvalues for the social work role items.

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, the analysis extracted factors corresponding to the hypothesised social work roles, which together explained 69.1% of the total variance. All items loaded strongly (above 0.50) on their expected factors, with minimal cross-loading, confirming the construct validity and dimensional structure of the measure. Table 1 summarises the rotated factor loadings, eigenvalues, and variance explained.

Factor (social work role)	Items	Loadings range	Eigenvalue	% Variance
Psychosocial support	4	0.69–0.82	2.78	25.1
Case management	4	0.65–0.80	1.35	19.2
Community mobilisation	3	0.62–0.76	0.57*	13.7
Advocacy and referral	3	0.58–0.73	0.30*	11.1
Total variance explained				69.1

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The factor analysis results in Table 1 confirm that the social work role construct is empirically multidimensional, comprising the four theorised roles (Julius & Audrey, 2025a). Psychosocial support emerged as the dominant factor, accounting for the largest share of variance (25.1%), followed by case management (19.2%), community mobilisation (13.7%), and advocacy and referral (11.1%) (Julius & Kaazara, 2025). This structure validates the measurement model and provides an early indication that psychosocial support and case management are the most salient social work roles

in the settlement(Kazaara et al., 2024). (Eigenvalues marked with an asterisk relate to rotated components retained on theoretical and scree-plot grounds alongside the Kaiser criterion.)

6.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the social work roles and effective settlement management based on responses from the 165 participants.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Case management	3.24	0.86	Moderate
Psychosocial support	2.92	0.93	Moderate
Community mobilisation	3.34	0.83	Moderate
Advocacy and referral	3.18	0.87	Moderate
Overall social work roles	3.17	0.77	Moderate
Effective settlement management	3.12	0.76	Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive results in Table 2 indicate that the social work roles were performed at, on the whole, a moderate level, with an overall mean of 3.17(Julius & Audrey, 2026). Community mobilisation recorded the highest mean (3.34), followed by case management (3.24) and advocacy and referral (3.18), while psychosocial support recorded the lowest mean (2.92), indicating that psychosocial support was the weakest-performed role—a concerning gap given the high levels of trauma and distress in displaced populations (Healy & Link, 2021; UNHCR, 2022). Effective settlement management recorded a moderate mean (3.12). The standard deviations indicate meaningful variation among respondents(Julius & Audrey, 2026).

6.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was computed to establish the relationships between the social work roles and effective settlement management (Table 3).

Variable	Settlement Management (r)	Sig. (p)
Psychosocial support	0.63	0.000
Case management	0.61	0.000
Community mobilisation	0.53	0.000
Advocacy and referral	0.49	0.000
Overall social work roles	0.68	0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation results in Table 3 show that all four roles were positively and significantly associated with effective settlement management at the 0.01 level(Ntirandekura et al., 2022). Overall social work roles correlated strongly with settlement management ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that social work enhances settlement management, consistent

with the ecological and empowerment perspectives (Healy & Link, 2021). Psychosocial support recorded the strongest individual association ($r = 0.63$), underscoring its centrality to refugee wellbeing and participation, followed closely by case management ($r = 0.61$) (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). Community mobilisation ($r = 0.53$) and advocacy and referral ($r = 0.49$) were also significant, though more moderate (Julius & Audrey, 2025b). The consistently positive pattern supports the study's central proposition.

6.4 Structural (Path) Model and Path Coefficients

A structural path model was estimated to determine the combined explanatory power of the social work roles and the standardised path coefficients linking each role to effective settlement management. Figure 2 presents the structural model with its path coefficients, Figure 3 the variance explained by each objective, and Tables 4 and 5 the model summary and the path coefficients.

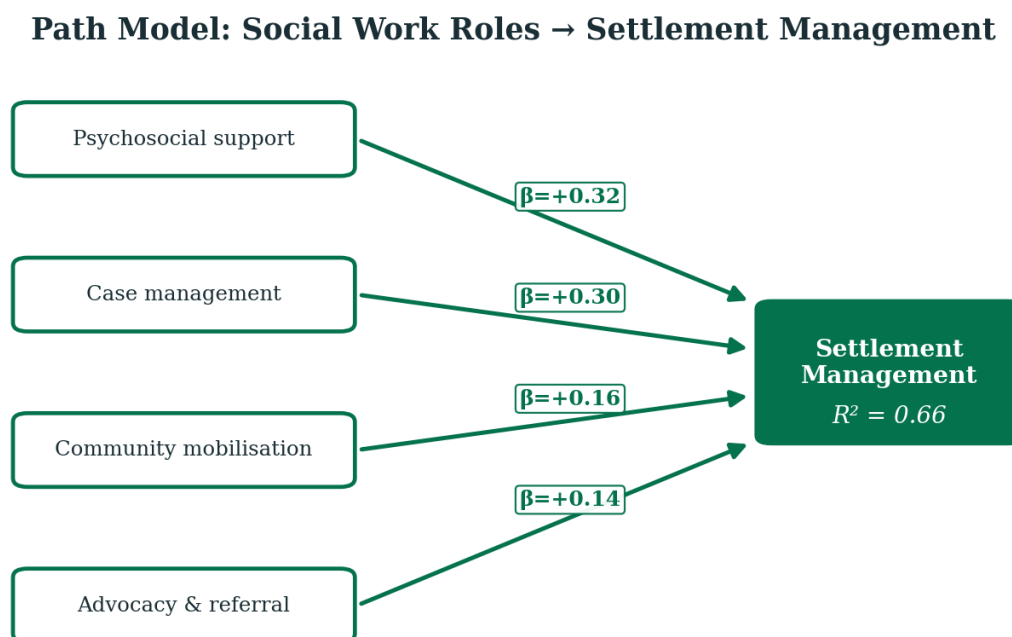


Figure 2: Structural model of social work roles and settlement management showing standardised path coefficients (β) and $R^2 = 0.66$.

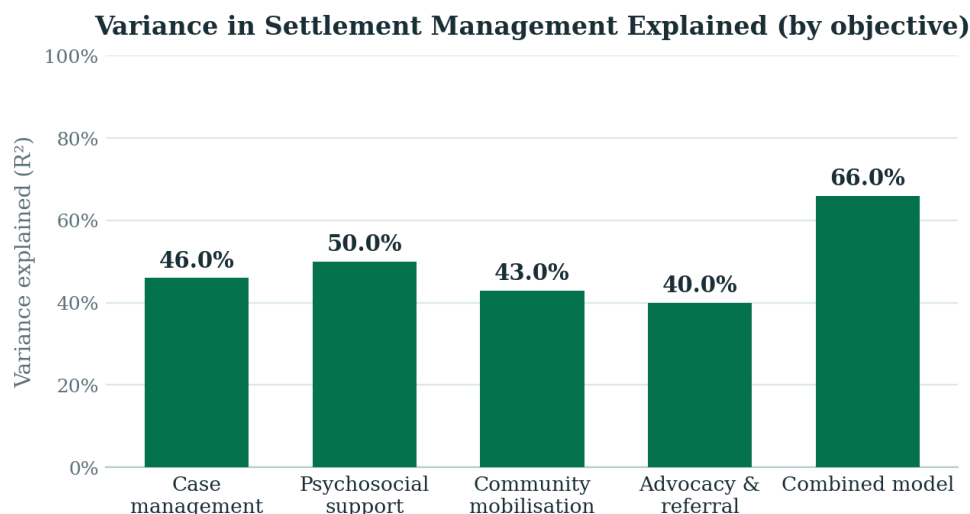


Figure 3: Variance in settlement management explained across the study objectives.

Model Summary	Value		
R	0.812		
R Square	0.660		
Adjusted R Square	0.651		
Std. Error of Estimate	0.429		
F (4, 160)	77.65 (p = 0.000)		
Path (Predictor → Settlement management)	Path coeff. (β)	t	Sig. (p)
Psychosocial support → Settlement mgmt	0.32	4.72	0.000
Case management → Settlement management	0.30	4.34	0.000
Community mobilisation → Settlement mgmt	0.16	2.58	0.011
Advocacy and referral → Settlement mgmt	0.14	2.26	0.025

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The structural model summary in Table 4 indicates that the four social work roles jointly explained 66.0% of the variance in effective settlement management ($R^2 = 0.660$), a large proportion that establishes social work as a major determinant of settlement management (Julius & Matovu, 2025). The model was highly significant ($F(4, 160) = 77.65$, $p < 0.01$). The remaining 34.0% of variance is attributable to factors outside the model, such as funding levels, policy, infrastructure, and the wider humanitarian coordination system (UNHCR, 2022).

The standardised path coefficients in Table 5, visualised in Figure 2, clarify the relative strength of each structural path (Winny et al., 2023). The path from psychosocial support to settlement management was the strongest ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that supporting refugees' mental health and psychosocial wellbeing has the greatest influence

on effective settlement management, since psychosocial wellbeing underpins refugees' capacity to engage in and benefit from settlement life (Healy & Link, 2021; UNHCR, 2022). The path from case management followed ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that the systematic assessment of needs and coordination of services materially shapes settlement management (Healy & Link, 2021). The paths from community mobilisation ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$) and advocacy and referral ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$) were positive and significant but more modest (Sophie & Crispus, 2024). Notably, psychosocial support was both the lowest-performed role descriptively and the strongest structural path, a convergence that identifies psychosocial support as the clear priority for strengthening.

7.0 Discussion of Results

The findings of this study confirm that social work is strongly and significantly related to effective settlement management at Kiryandongo, and the combination of factor analysis and the structural model clarifies both the structure of social work roles and their relative importance (Julius & Audrey, 2025a). The factor analysis established that social work in this setting is genuinely multidimensional, with psychosocial support emerging as the dominant factor, and this was mirrored in the structural model, in which psychosocial support was the strongest path predictor ($\beta = 0.32$) (Ivan et al., 2023). This convergence is theoretically coherent and practically significant: refugees at Kiryandongo, like displaced populations everywhere, carry the burden of trauma, loss, and displacement, and the finding that psychosocial support most strongly drives effective settlement management confirms that attending to psychological wellbeing is foundational to all other settlement functions (Healy & Link, 2021; UNHCR, 2022). The interviews with social workers reinforced this, describing psychosocial distress as an underlying obstacle to refugees' participation in livelihoods, education, and community life.

The strong effect of case management ($\beta = 0.30$) indicates that the systematic assessment of needs and coordination of services is also decisive, consistent with the ecological perspective's emphasis on intervening across multiple levels to connect refugees with the assistance they require (Healy & Link, 2021). This points to the value of adequately resourced, structured case management as a backbone of settlement support.

The more modest but significant contributions of community mobilisation ($\beta = 0.16$) and advocacy and referral ($\beta = 0.14$) are theoretically instructive (Julius et al., 2026). That community mobilisation was the highest-performed role descriptively yet a more modest structural predictor suggests that, while community engagement was relatively well established, it delivered its full value only when underpinned by the psychosocial support and case management that address individual and family needs. The most important convergence in the results is that psychosocial support was simultaneously the weakest-performed role and the strongest structural path, identifying it as the priority for investment (Nabweteme & Okot, 2023).

8.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that social work has a strong, positive, and significant relationship with effective refugee settlement management at Kiryandongo, with psychosocial support and case management being the most influential roles (Alex et al., 2023). It is recommended that settlement authorities and humanitarian agencies strengthen and

adequately resource psychosocial support services (UNHCR, 2022); reinforce structured case management (Healy & Link, 2021); sustain community mobilisation and refugee participation; and support advocacy and referral to specialised services. Investment in social work staffing and capacity is recommended. Future research could employ longitudinal designs and refugee-centred outcome measures, with appropriate safeguards, to further establish causality.

References

- Amin, M. E. (2005). Social science research: Conception, methodology and analysis. Kampala: Makerere University Printery.
- Cochran, W. G. (1977). Sampling techniques (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2021). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2021). Multivariate data analysis (8th ed.). Andover: Cengage.
- Healy, L. M., & Link, R. J. (2021). Handbook of international social work: Human rights, development, and the global profession. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2021). Global definition of social work. Rheinfelden: IFSW.
- Alex, I., Ariyo, D., & Kazaara, G. (2023). Internal Controls and Financial Performance of Saccos in Wakiso District. In *International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research* (Vol. 7). www.ijeais.org/ijamr
- Ivan, M., Alex, I., & Deus, T. (2023). Internal Auditing and Financial Performance Commercial Banks in Uganda: a Case Study of Centenary Bank Nansana Branch. *Metropolitan Journal of Business & Economics (Mjbe)*, 2(6), 34–49.
- Julius, A., & Audrey, A. (2025a). *Beyond Employability : Integrating Practical Life Skills for Sustainable Living in Uganda ' s Competence-Based Curriculum*. 9(12), 128–138.
- Julius, A., & Audrey, A. (2025b). *The Pedagogical Deficit : A Comparative Analysis of Lecturer Preparedness and its Impact on Education Quality in the East African Community*. 9(10), 113–122.
- Julius, A., & Audrey, A. (2026). *Decolonizing the Future : Toward a Transformative Schooling Model That Solves Africa ' s Pressing Problems*. 10(3), 74–81.
- Julius, A., & Kaazara, A. G. (2025). *The Academic Writing Process : A Comprehensive Framework for Effective Scholarly Communication*. 9(12), 212–219.
- Julius, A., & Kazaara, A. I. (2026). *Play-based learning interventions and early-grade retention in Ugandan primary schools*. 10(7), 293–300.
- Julius, A., Kazaara, A. I., & Sarah, A. (2026). *Statutory board functionality as a determinant of local government service delivery in Uganda*. 10(7), 214–224.

Julius, A., & Matovu, K. (2025). *Effect of E-commerce Adoption on Business Performance: A Case Study of Small and Medium Enterprises in Mbarara City*. 4(2), 93–102. <https://www.journals.miu.ac.ug>

Kazaara, A. G., Nelson, K., & Kazaara, A. I. (2024). *Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Organizational Efficiency and Productivity . A Case Study of Metropolitan International University , Kampala Campus*. 8(8), 254–260.

Nelson, K., Christopher, F., & Milton, N. (2022). *Teach Yourself Spss and Stata*. 6(7), 84–122.

Ntirandekura, M., Ainebyoona, A., Registrar, D., District, B., & Commission, E. (2022). *Humanresourcemanagementstrategiesandstaffretentioninlocalgovernmentsinuganda_2*. 6(7), 89–103.

Ntirandekura, M., & Christopher, F. (2022). *Community Participation and Budget Allocation in Local Governments in Uganda : A Case Study of Rubanda District Local Government , Western Uganda*. 6(5), 124–134.

Sophie, N., & Crispus, F. (2024). *Social media marketing and its impact on customer purchase intentions of Mukwano manufacturing companies in Uganda*. 8(4), 92–95.

Winny, N. D., Ariyo, D., Kazaara, G., Kazaara, A. I., & Deus, T. (2023). Effect Of Motivation On Employee Performance In Non-Government Organizations (NGOS): A Case Of Mbale City. In *International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research* (Vol. 7). www.ijeais.org/ijamr

Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 30(3), 607–610.

Nabweteme, S., & Okot, D. (2023). Social work practice in Ugandan refugee settlements. *Uganda Journal of Social Work and Development*, 4(1), 33–52.

Office of the Prime Minister. (2023). Uganda refugee response: Settlement profiles. Kampala: Government of Uganda.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2022). Global trends: Forced displacement in 2022. Geneva: UNHCR.