

Hunger and Food Insecurity in Uganda



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The Center of Faith, Family and Justice (CFFJ) is a Ugandan Christian Think Tank founded in 2021 to contribute to evidence-based policy, advocacy, and decision making. Our main focus is to investigate how the social, political and economic conditions of life affect faith, family and justice. We aspire to connect policymakers and citizens; and to build transformed, resilient, and integrated communities.

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Executive Summary

We all need food to survive! To have enough food for its people, a country must produce food on a scale large enough and make it easily accessible and affordable for the majority of its population. That is not the case for Uganda, a rather resource-rich country. In Uganda, farming is still predominantly subsistent. Households produce to consume first and sell any extras.

The rudimentary farming practices, however, render many a household vulnerable to weather changes and droughts. It is in these dire times that many succumb to hunger and food insecurity. Many go without meals and many more ration the little they have to sustain them over longer periods of time.

This policy brief explores who is hungry, why, and what effects hunger has on the Ugandan people. It goes on to recommend policies that may lift people out of hunger and food insecurity.



Introduction

Food insecurity and hunger have long characterized the poor in Uganda and yet according to the World Food Program, Uganda produces more food than it consumes (WFP n.d.). But why would a resource-rich country, that produces abundant food and earns billions of shillings in food exports, suffer food insecurity and hunger?

The Food Agricultural Organization (FAO), *defines hunger* as an uncomfortable physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of dietary energy (FAO n.d.). Living in chronic hunger conditions leads to undernourishment, which when prolonged leads to malnourishment and wasting.

Food insecurity, on the other hand, refers to the lack of regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and active and healthy life (FAO n.d.). With this understanding, we find that even people who are fairly economically engaged could easily suffer food insecurity, especially if they are unable to easily meet the costs of a balanced diet on a regular basis.

The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) categorizes food insecurity as shown in the figure below:

Figure 1: The Food Insecurity Experience Scale



Source: FAO, n.d.

Hunger is thus an indicator of food insecurity. Hunger and malnutrition are signs of moderate and severe food insecurity.

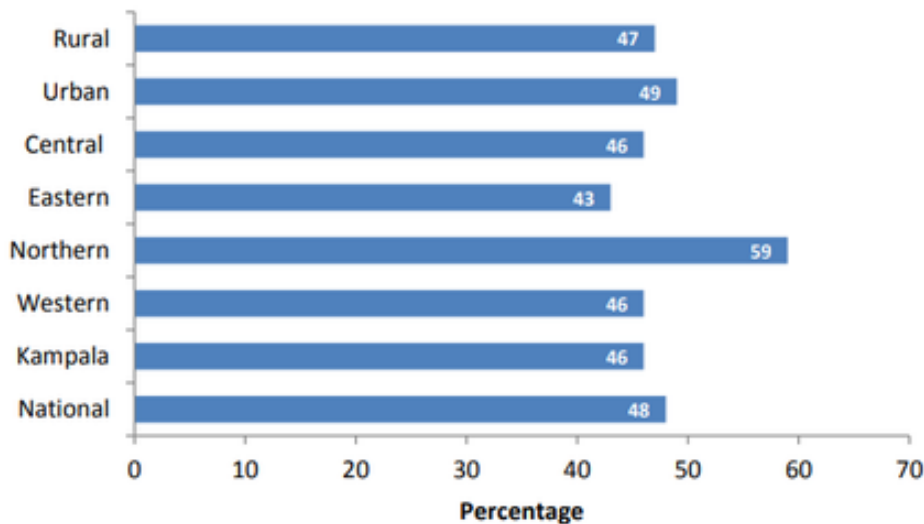
In 2013, over one fifth (20.3%) of Ugandans suffered 'unacceptable' food consumption, with 4.7% in the 'poor' category and 21.3% in the 'borderline' category (WFP 2013). In 2015, the FAO estimated the number of Ugandans who were food secure to be 89%, with people from the Karamoja, Teso and the Acholi regions suffering chronic food insecurity because of long dry spells (FAO 2015).

The majority of Ugandans are rural-based and predominantly rely on food from subsistence rain-fed farming. Some of the common staple foods in Uganda include plantain, maize, cassava, rice, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, beans, peas, groundnuts, millet, and sorghum. The rudimentary farming methods used, however, leave many gardens vulnerable to unpredictable weather changes. Crops suffer destruction when heavy rains or long dry spells plague the planted lands.

Hunger and Food Insecurity in Uganda

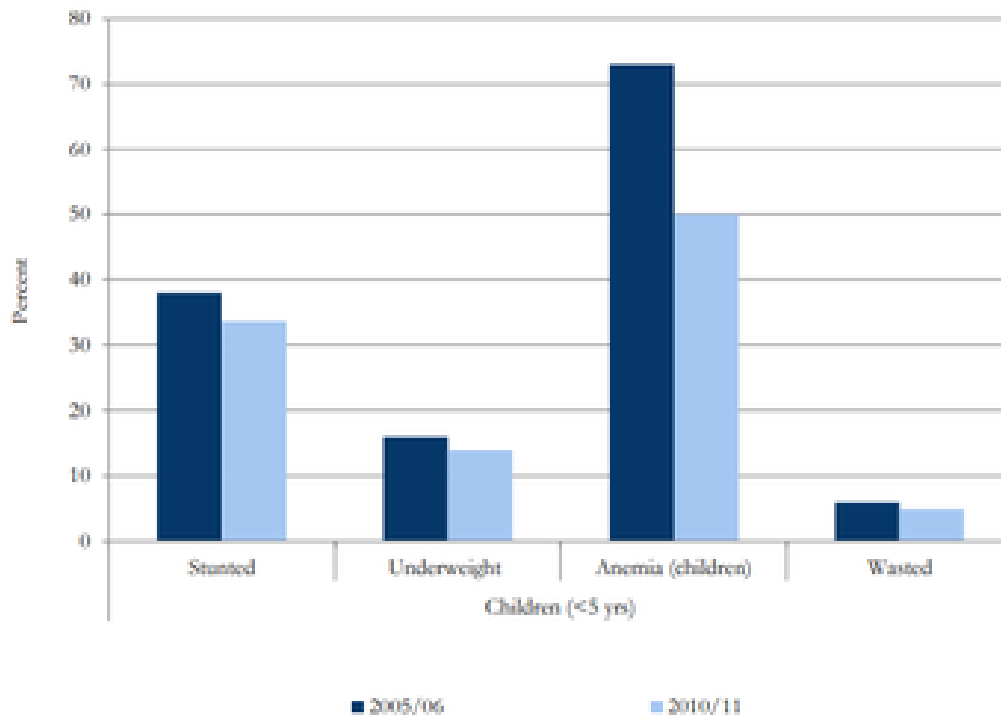
In Uganda, at any one point, thousands of families are living on one or two staple foods for months on end because they are too poor to afford diversified meals. In such circumstances, these people remain undernourished because they do not receive all the daily recommended minimum food nutrients required for healthy growth.

Figure 2: Percentage of population that are energy deficient



Source: CFSVA 2013 report

Figure 3: Trends in nutrition outcomes in Uganda, 2005/06–2010/11



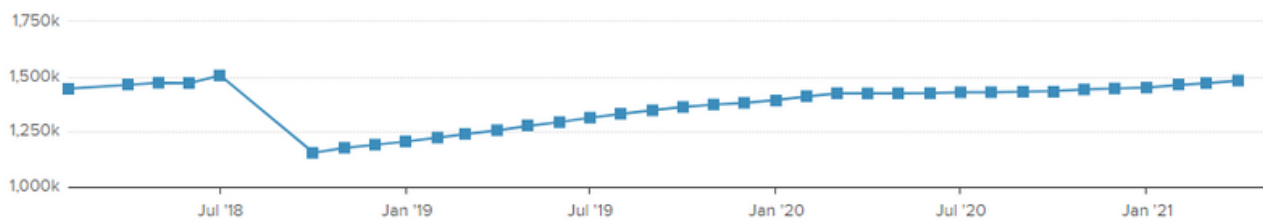
Source: UBOS Data, Brookings Institute report

Who is suffering from food insecurity and hunger?

A report by WFP cited the poor, households headed by women, and subsistence farmers to be among the most vulnerable groups (WFP 2013). In addition to this, the place with the highest food insecurity was Northern Uganda. Western Uganda also suffered from minimal diversity of food.

However, refugees in Uganda are also highly vulnerable to suffering food insecurity and hunger. Uganda is the second largest refugee host globally while the single largest refugee host in Africa. As of April 2021, the UNHCR places Uganda's refugee count at 1,482,101 (UNHCR 2021), with most of the refugees settling in the northern region of Uganda.

Figure 4: Total Refugees in Uganda, by month



Source: UNHCR 2021

Within Uganda, South Sudanese form the largest number of refugees at 62% and refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) form the second largest portion at 29%. Uganda has done exceptionally well in welcoming, hosting and integrating refugees in Uganda. The pro-refugee policies in the country allow refugees to resettle and even make meaningful and significant contributions to Uganda's economy. However, because refugees do take time to achieve comfortable socio-economic situations, many refugees are vulnerable to starvation and hunger.

Reasons for Hunger and Malnutrition

Poverty: Inability to buy food at prevailing market prices.

Climatic conditions: Droughts and heavy rains coupled with rudimentary farming methods allows for crop destruction and sometimes on scales large enough to lead to food shortages, especially for subsistence farmers. The highest incidences of drought are in the northern region of Uganda, especially because of the naturally arid region which does not favour the growth of many varieties of crops-especially through rudimentary methods.

Displacement of persons: refugees are particularly vulnerable to suffering hunger because they come into Uganda escaping political hostility in their countries of origin. They come without property or lands and many come into the country without enough money to live on. This renders them vulnerable to suffering hunger.

The Government of Uganda (GoU), and humanitarian organisations like the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and FAO come together to relieve those in need with food aid. These feeding programmes have staved off the starvation of millions of people.

Effects of Hunger and Food Insecurity on the Ugandan population

In many ways, hunger and food insecurity *compromise Human Capital Development*. It is challenging for humans to reach their full potential or work optimally under hungry conditions.

Poor health: Persons suffering from hunger and food insecurity are vulnerable to disease, stuntedness (especially among children), physical weakness, anxiety and depression.

Hunger and food insecurity put sufferers in *survival mode*. They fail to look beyond the next meal. Hunger causes desperation which may push some sufferers to engage in indignities like prostitution or criminal activity, with the intention to survive.

Reduced productivity: undernourishment renders people physically vulnerable and sometimes inept of meeting the physical demands of their work. On average, hunger and malnutrition cost Uganda \$899 million (Diiro, n.d.)

Policy Recommendations

To provide an environment conducive for innovation, hard work, citizen participation and development, Uganda must deal with the issue of food insecurity and hunger among its people. The following policy recommendations should be implemented in addition to current initiatives the country has been taking:

Provide essential foods to the poor and vulnerable at *subsidized prices* to increase their accessibility to food.

Educate farmers on modern and scientific farming practices. Upgrading their farming methods would climate-proof their harvests, minimizing crop losses, while increasing crop yields.

Facilitate farmers to implement modern farming practices.

Promoting education which empowers people to make greater socio-economic contributions to society. Education facilitates the financial empowerment of its recipients.

Promoting entrepreneurship which also facilitates the financial empowerment of individuals. The more money people have, the more they are able to allocate to balanced meals.

Conclusion

It is grossly ironic that high levels of hunger and malnutrition exist in Uganda, a resource-rich country that exports food to other nations. This phenomenon points to the gross under-utilization of the country's resources, both human and natural. Food insecurity prevents Uganda from reaching its full potential by compromising the country's human capital. If Uganda is to optimally utilize its resources, its people must be healthy and able to make meaningful economic contributions in the country.

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