



The Biometrically Verified Food Distribution (BVFD) Challenge

Key audience: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP)

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Summary

Uganda recently became one of the biggest refugee hosting countries in the world; it is currently hosting over one million South Sudanese refugees. The country is praised worldwide for its positivity towards refugees' freedom of movement and access to employment. However, it has faced challenges in the delivery of aid, particularly food aid, to the refugee community.

In 2018, UNHCR and WFP introduced the "Biometrically Verified Food Distribution (BVFD)" system as an innovative approach to improve transparency and accountability. The BVFD system scans the eyes, fingerprints and ration cards of the person collecting food aid, and his or her identity is verified against a WFP database. However, as effective as the BVFD policy may be in improving transparency and accountability, our research suggests that it may prevent food from getting to those most in need.

First, people who are missing from or inaccurately entered in the database are turned away, even if they otherwise qualify for aid; and second, children under 14 are being turned away when they are sent to collect their families' rations. In order to address these problems, UNHCR, Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and WFP should lower food aid collection age and update registration and biometric verification database more frequently and manage it better.

Background

In 2018, OPM and UNHCR undertook registration and biometric verification of refugees and asylum seekers in all the settlements in Uganda. During registration, fingerprint sensor and scanner, card scanner and iris and face scanner are used to perfect identification. Under current BVFD policy, all persons seeking food distributions must be registered in the database and their settlement, block and zone must correspond with the distribution site. In addition, only persons who are 14 years and above are allowed to receive food aid for their households, and persons with special needs (PSN) are required to send their alternate food collectors to receive food aid for them. The distribution site staff cannot provide aid to individuals who do not meet these requirements.

This can be a particular hardship for people who have recently arrived from other locations, as well as households with young children and those headed by a single mother, as there may not be a qualifying person available to attend the food distribution due to child care or income-generation duties. As in other settlements, a majority of the refugee population in Palabek settlement are children and women: [children make up 70%](#) of the population and 75% of households are headed by women.

Research methods

Our research was conducted in Palabek refugee settlement between October 2017 and November 2018. Palabek is the newest Ugandan refugee settlement, founded in April 2017 in Lamwo district, northern Uganda and about 45 kilometres away from the border between Uganda and South Sudan. Our aim was to examine that many of the back and forth movements of South Sudanese in Northern



Uganda are intimately connected to obtaining not only food but other aspects of individual and familial continuity including: jobs, healthcare, money, schooling and spouses. We conducted numerous formal, semi-formal and informal interviews and discussions with representatives and employees of NGOs, OPM, WFP and UNHCR as well as various refugee and host community leaders. We also observed a number of community and stakeholder events, including: food distributions at several sites in Palabek, both before and after introduction of BVFD; stakeholder and inter-agency meetings; the full range of events surrounding the Palabek Refugee Welfare Council (RWC)¹ elections; and church, school, clan, family and other gatherings.

Findings

The qualitative research highlights two important points. Firstly, a significant number of households are not receiving food aid as they should because their names do not appear in the database or because their names appear in connection with a different block, zone or settlement. For example, in October 2018, out of 996 households in zone one, 80 households were denied food aid because their households did not yet appear in the BVFD database. Four families in zone two and about ten families in zone seven also missed food aid. Similarly, about 32 households in zone four were reportedly denied food aid in July, 2018. Secondly, some households are not receiving food aid because children age 13 and younger are not allowed to collect it. The age restrictions were one of the frequently registered complaints raised at UNHCR's litigation desk.

Recommendations

The BVFD is a good innovation, but the system currently turns away too many people who need aid. In addition, the system cannot address the refugees' needs unless it is more promptly updated and carefully managed. Thus, we recommend the following:

- Revise the humanitarian food distribution policy to allow any person aged 5 and above who is in the UNHCR/WFP's biometric food distribution system to collect food aid for their family.
- Boost the capacity of UNHCR/WFP's personnel and improve the management of BVFD system to ensure that the system is promptly updated so that no registered and biometrically verified refugee is denied food aid.

Food is an essential component of protection which enable refugees to survive, recover and regain stability thus it is important that that policy and procedures should make sure refugee receive food whenever they need it. If BVFD policy is too strict to an extent of making refugee miss food aid then protection agencies especially UNHCR and Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) might have failed to provide protection to refugee.

References

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¹ The formal authority structure of Palabek Refugee Settlement has demarcations at the Block, Zone, and Camp levels, and this structure is allegedly set up to mirror Uganda's governmental Local Councillor or LC-system. While in Uganda this is a numerical system running from the Village-level LC1 through to the District-level LC5, in the settlement this system is termed the Refugee Welfare Council or RWC and runs from the Block-level RWC1 through to Camp-level RWC3. In this way, the RWC1 or Block Leader is said to be directly analogous to a Village-level LC1, the RWC2 or Zone Leader similar to a Parish-level LC2, and the RWC3 or Camp Chairman identical to the LC3 at the Sub-County level.



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