

**The Coping Mechanisms Adopted by Refugees in Response to Aid Reduction in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement, Kawenge District, Uganda.**

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**Abstract**

The study examined the coping mechanism adopted by refugees in response to aid reductions in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in Kamwenge District, Uganda. The background of the study was anchored on the persistent global decline in humanitarian funding and the widening gap between refugee needs and available donor support, which has significantly constrained service delivery in protracted refugee settings. The study was guided by the Human Needs Theory propounded by Abraham Maslow, which emphasizes physiological needs (such as food, water, and shelter) and safety needs (including security and health). The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A total sample of 40 respondents was targeted, comprising 25 refugee household heads, 5 community leaders, 5 humanitarian staff, and 5 local service providers, achieving a 100% response rate. Data were collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and structured tools. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, chi-square tests, and multiple linear regression, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results revealed that, a significant association was found between gender and negative coping mechanisms ( $\chi^2 = 4.232$ ,  $p = 0.040$ ), indicating that female-headed households were more vulnerable. Education level also significantly influenced coping strategies ( $\chi^2 = 9.381$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ), with more educated respondents adopting income-generating strategies. The study concluded that humanitarian aid reduction has led to severe multi-dimensional welfare deterioration, particularly in food security, healthcare access, education, and livelihoods. Although refugees adopted various coping mechanisms such as subsistence farming (68.0%), casual labour (56.0%), and petty trade (52.0%), these strategies were largely insufficient, with many households resorting to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour (56.0%), early marriage (28.0%), and transactional sex (24.0%).

The study recommended that humanitarian agencies and governments should prioritize restoration of food and healthcare assistance, strengthen livelihood diversification programs, invest in refugee education and skills development, and promote sustainable funding mechanisms to bridge the humanitarian financing gap. Furthermore, targeted interventions should be implemented to protect vulnerable groups, especially women and children, from harmful coping strategies.

**Keywords: Coping mechanisms, Refugee, Aid Reduction**

**Introduction**

Refugee is defined under international law, notably the 1951 Refugee Convention, as individuals who have fled their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular

social group, or political opinion. According to Crisp (2003), refugees are not merely displaced individuals; they embody a spectrum of identities and experiences that shape their resilience and agency.

Therefore, Uganda as a country has long been recognized for its progressive policies towards refugees, hosting some of the largest populations throughout Africa, primarily due to armed conflicts and political instability in neighboring countries. The Rwamwanja refugee settlement, established in 2013, provides a unique case for examining the implications of aid reductions on refugee welfare in a context marked by increasing economic pressures and changing political priorities. As international donor funding fluctuates, the sustainability of social services, livelihood opportunities, and overall welfare for refugees is increasingly at risk. This study seeks to critically analyze the impacts of these aid reductions on the lived experiences of refugees in Rwamwanja, focusing on essential dimensions such as food security, healthcare access, and educational opportunities. By delving into the micro-level implications of macroeconomic shifts, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by refugees in Uganda and advocate for more resilient strategies in humanitarian responses.

Furthermore, Uganda is consistently ranked among the top refugee-hosting nations in Africa and the world, currently accommodating close to 1.7 million refugees and asylum seekers as of 2024, primarily due to armed conflicts and political instability in neighboring countries. The nation's open-door policy, enshrined in the Refugees Act 2006, grants refugees rights such as freedom of movement, the ability to work, and access to land for subsistence farming, aligning with the development-oriented approach promoted by frameworks like the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). This model, as noted by Betts et al. (2019) (as cited in), allows refugees to work and move freely, shifting the paradigm from mere care and maintenance to one of self-reliance and empowerment.

However, the sustainability of this model is increasingly threatened by external funding volatility. The humanitarian response is plagued by significant shortfalls; for instance, the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (UCRRP) for 2024 required \$858 million but had only secured 13% of the necessary funds by mid-year. This chronic underfunding has direct, tangible consequences for refugee welfare. Maciej Grześkowiak (2024), in his analysis of the "Uganda Model," emphasizes that the system is on the brink of failure without proportionate international support, suggesting a persistent need to assess how reduced outcomes for refugees can be mitigated. Furthermore, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has warned of anticipated impacts across all sectors, including reduced staffing and capacity for protection, health, education, livelihoods, WASH, shelter, and environment programming due to the shrinking funding environment (UNHCR Data Portal, 2025).

The impact of aid reductions is not merely theoretical; it forces refugees into precarious situations. Jatuporn Lee, a UNHCR local representative, reported that the impact of reduced support, often stemming from cuts like those by USAID, resulted in increased food insecurity, higher land rental costs, growing mental health challenges, and surges in gender-based violence (The Guardian, 2025). In some instances, shrinking support has led to refugees returning to conflict zones, as documented where food ration cuts were cited as a primary reason for premature return to South Sudan (Global Press Journal, 2025). Conversely, research by Travis Baseler et al. (2023) has explored the political

**Received: 14.04.2026**

**Accepted: 19.04.2026**

**Published on: 30.04.2026**

economy of aid, finding that redistributing a portion of aid to host communities, and clearly communicating this link, can substantially increase local support for policies facilitating refugee integration. This study, therefore, investigated the specific manifestation of these generalized funding pressures on the coping mechanisms adopted by the refugees Rwamwanja refugee settlement in response to aid reductions.

### **Statement of Problem**

It should be noted that, Uganda has long been recognized globally for its progressive and inclusive refugee policy that allows refugees freedom of movement, access to land and the right to work. For years, humanitarian aid complemented these policies thus enabling refugees to enjoy relatively stable welfare conditions within settlements such as Rwamwanja. Before the reduction in aid, refugees received regular food rations covering up to 100% of their nutritional requirements, free primary education for children and accessible healthcare services supported by various humanitarian organizations. Livelihood programs flourished, empowering many families to engage in small scale farming, petty trade and vocational training. The partnership between the Ugandan government, UNHCR, and international donors created a model settlement where refugees could rebuild their lives with dignity and a sense of security (UNHCR, 2018).

However, the competing global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inflationary pressures has redirected funds away from refugee welfare programs. Currently, refugees in Rwamwanja face severe food shortages following ration cuts by the World Food Programme (WFP), which in some cases have dropped from 100% to less than 60% of basic food needs. Schools that once provided free meals and learning materials are now overcrowded and under-resourced, while health centers face shortages of drugs, staff, and essential supplies (WFP, 2023; UNHCR, 2024). The once-promising livelihood projects have either been scaled down or discontinued entirely, leaving many households without stable income sources.

As a result, the welfare of refugees has declined sharply. Many families now survive on a single meal per day, children are dropping out of school, and medical care has become a privilege rather than a right. Tensions between refugees and host communities have also risen due to competition for limited resources such as water, land, and firewood. The general atmosphere in the settlement has shifted from one of hope and self-reliance to one marked by uncertainty, dependency and frustration.

Despite these alarming developments, limited research has been conducted to systematically establish the coping mechanisms adopted by the refugees in Uganda in respect of aid reductions. Most existing studies focus on refugee integration or policy frameworks but overlook the tangible, lived realities within settlements experiencing funding cuts. The absence of empirical evidence on this issue undermines efforts to design responsive policies and interventions that can sustain refugee welfare under reduced aid conditions. This study was therefore, conducted to fill that gap by investigating the coping mechanisms adopted by refugees in response to aid reductions in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement.

### **Objective**

**Received: 14.04.2026**

**Accepted: 19.04.2026**

**Published on: 30.04.2026**

To establish the coping mechanisms adopted by refugees in response to aid reduction in Rwamwanja settlement

**Research Question**

What coping mechanisms are adopted by refugees in Rwamwanja settlement in response to Aid reduction?

**Methodology**

The study employed a quantitative and qualitative research approach. This design was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of refugees affected by declining humanitarian aid. The descriptive element helps to document and interpret the current welfare conditions of refugees concerning food, education, healthcare, and livelihoods.

The study was conducted in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement, located in Kamwenge District, Western Uganda. Established in 2012, Rwamwanja hosts primarily Congolese refugees who fled conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The settlement is managed jointly by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), alongside several humanitarian partners. Rwamwanja was selected because it has experienced significant aid cuts over recent years, affecting food distribution, education, and healthcare programs.

According to the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM, 2024), Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in Kamwenge District hosts over 70,000 refugees mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The settlement also includes local leaders, humanitarian workers and service providers who work in health and education sectors (UNHCR, 2024). This forms the broader population from which the study respondents were drawn. In research, a population refers to the complete group of individuals possessing shared characteristics relevant to the study. Therefore, the target population for this study includes refugee household heads, community leaders, humanitarian staff (from agencies such as UNHCR and WFP) and local service providers such as teachers and health workers. The total target population is estimated at 200 individuals within Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement who directly engage with or are affected by humanitarian aid programs. From this population, a sample of 40 participants was selected purposively to represent the different stakeholder categories. This sample is considered adequate to generate rich qualitative insights on the impacts of aid reduction on refugees' welfare in the settlement.

The sample size for this study was determined using the Morgan and Krejcie (1970) formula for determining a representative sample from a known population. The formula is stated as:

$$S = \frac{X^2 \cdot N \cdot P \cdot (1-P)}{d^2 \cdot (N-1) + X^2 \cdot P \cdot (1-P)}$$

Where S = required sample size

X<sup>2</sup> = table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level

(3.841 for 95% confidence)

. N = population size

. P = population proportion (assumed to be 0.5, which gives the maximum sample size)

. d = degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (0.05 for 5% margin of error)

$$S = \frac{3.841.200.05.(1-0.5)}{0.05^2.(200-1)+3.841.05.(1-0.5)}$$

$$S = \frac{192.05}{1.45775} = 99.65$$

S= 131.8 respondents

Sample size =131.8 Respondents.

Therefore, the sample size (S) is approximately 132 respondents. Therefore, the data was analyzed inform of tables, frequencies and percentages using SPSS & STATA (Nelson et. 2022).

**Results**

**Table1: Response Rate by Respondent Category**

<b>Respondent Category</b>	<b>Target (n)</b>	<b>Achieved (n)</b>	<b>Response Rate (%)</b>
Refugee Household Heads	25	25	100.0
Community Leaders	5	5	100.0
Humanitarian Staff (UNHCR, WFP, IRC, OPM, NRC)	5	5	100.0
Local Service Providers (Teachers, Health Workers)	5	5	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**1.1.1 Chi-Square Test: Association Between Gender and Negative Coping Mechanisms**

A second chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine whether a statistically significant association existed between the gender of the refugee household head and the likelihood of reporting negative coping mechanisms within the household or immediate community. This analysis was grounded in protection-oriented literature which consistently documented that female-headed households were disproportionately exposed to negative coping strategies such as transactional sex, early marriage, and child labour as a consequence of economic stress induced by aid reduction. The null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>) posited no significant association between gender and negative coping, while the alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>) stated that a significant association existed. The cross-tabulation and chi-square results are presented in Tables 4.9 and 4.10.

**Table 2: Cross-tabulation: Gender by Negative Coping Mechanism Reported**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Negative Coping Reported (f)</b>	<b>No Negative Coping (f)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Male	6	6	12

Female	11	2	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>25</b>

The table presented the cross-tabulation of respondents' gender and whether they reported negative coping strategies. The findings showed that among male respondents (12), 6 reported using negative coping strategies, while the other 6 did not report any negative coping. Among female respondents (13), the majority (11) reported negative coping strategies, whereas only 2 reported no negative coping.

**Table 3: Chi-Square Test Results of Gender and Negative Coping**

<b>Chi-Square Tests</b>				
<b>Test</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</b>	<b>Exact Sig. (2-sided)</b>
Pearson Chi-Square	4.232b	1	.040	
Continuity Correction <sup>a</sup>	2.772	1	.096	
Likelihood Ratio	4.422	1	.035	
Fisher's Exact Test				.083
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.063	1	.044	
N of Valid Cases	25			
a. Computed only for a 2x2 table				
b. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count < 5. Minimum expected count is 3.84.				

The Pearson chi-square result was  $\chi^2(1) = 4.232$ ,  $p = .040$ , which was statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, and it was concluded that there was a statistically significant association between the gender of the household head and the likelihood of reporting negative coping mechanisms. An examination of the cross-tabulation revealed that 84.6% of female-headed households (n=11 out of 13) reported the presence of negative coping mechanisms either within their household or in their immediate community, compared to only 50.0% of male-headed households (n=6 out of 12). The Fisher's Exact Test p-value of .083 was somewhat less significant due to the small sample size, but the overall pattern was consistent and interpretively meaningful. These findings provided empirical support for the widely documented observation that female-headed refugee households were significantly more vulnerable to protection risks and negative coping strategies during periods of reduced humanitarian support.

**1.2.0 Coping Mechanisms Adopted by Refugees in Response to Aid Reduction**

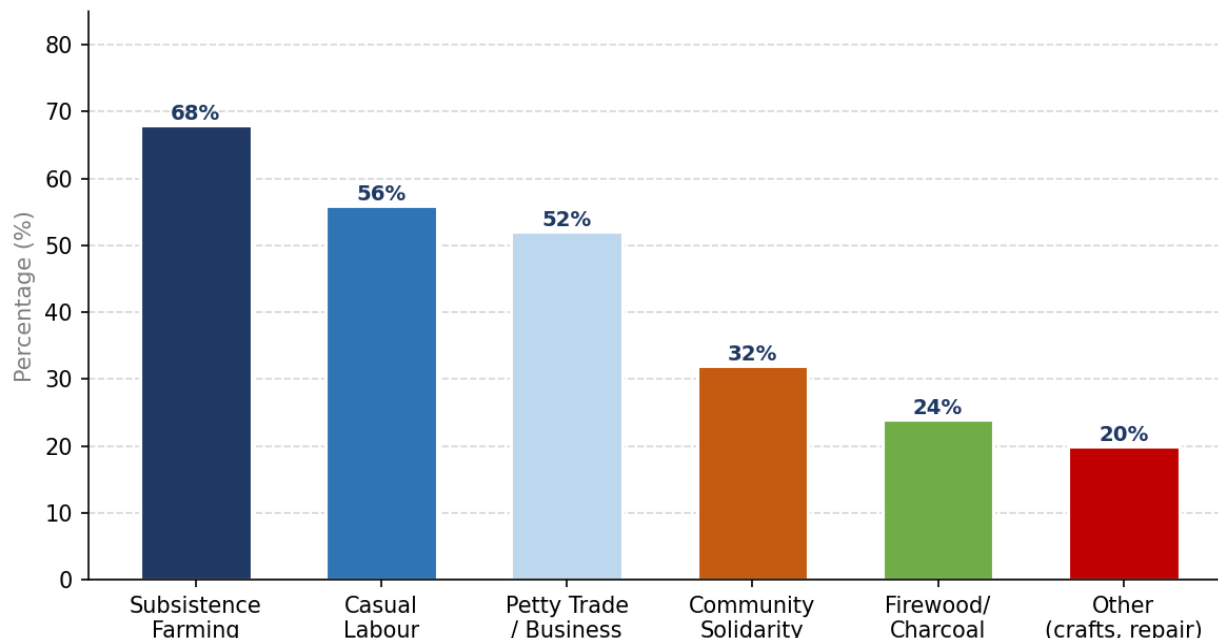
**1.2.1 Quantitative Findings: Positive Coping Strategies**

The third objective of the study examined the range of coping strategies that refugee households had adopted in response to the reduction in humanitarian aid. Coping strategies were categorized into two broad types: positive or adaptive coping mechanisms, which represented constructive livelihood and community strategies, and negative coping mechanisms, which involved behaviour that compromised household dignity, safety, or long-term wellbeing. Among positive coping strategies, subsistence farming on the allocated settlement plots was the most commonly reported approach, cited by 68.0% (n=17) of refugee household heads. Casual labour on host community farms was the second most prevalent coping strategy at 56.0% (n=14), followed by petty trade and small business activities at 52.0% (n=13). Community solidarity and food-sharing arrangements were reported by 32.0% of respondents (n=8), while selling firewood and charcoal was noted by 24.0% (n=6), and other strategies such as craft-making, phone repair, tutoring, and informal service provision were reported by 20.0% (n=5). These findings are presented in Table 4.16 and Figure 5.

**Table 4: Positive Coping Strategies Used by Refugee Households (Multiple Response, n=25)**

<b>Coping Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency (f)</b>	<b>% of Respondents</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Subsistence farming / home garden	17	68.0	1st
Casual labour (farm work, construction)	14	56.0	2nd
Petty trade / small business	13	52.0	3rd
Community solidarity / food sharing	8	32.0	4th
Selling firewood / charcoal	6	24.0	5th
Other (crafts, repair, tutoring)	5	20.0	6th

**Figure 5: Coping Strategies Used by Refugees (Multiple Response, n=25)**



**Figure 5: Positive Coping Strategies Used by Refugees (Multiple Response, n=25)**

**4.6.2 Quantitative Findings: Negative Coping Mechanisms**

The study also documented the prevalence of negative coping mechanisms within refugee households and communities, representing responses to aid reduction that carried significant protection, health, and educational risks. As presented in Table 4.17 and Figure 6, child labour and school dropout was the most commonly reported negative coping mechanism, noted by 56.0% of respondents (n=14). Early or forced marriage was reported by 28.0% (n=7), the same proportion as those who reported no negative coping mechanisms in their households (n=7). Transactional sex and gender-based violence were reported by 24.0% (n=6), drug and alcohol abuse by 16.0% (n=4), and child begging by 12.0% (n=3). It was important to note that these figures represented self-reported observations of what respondents had witnessed either within their own households or in their immediate community, and likely represented underestimates of actual prevalence due to social stigma, fear of reprisal, and the inherently sensitive nature of these phenomena.

**Table 5: Negative Coping Mechanisms Reported (Multiple Response, n=25)**

Negative Coping Mechanism	Frequency (f)	% of Respondents	Risk Category
Child labour / school dropout	14	56.0	Child Rights / Education
Early or forced marriage	7	28.0	Protection / GBV
Transactional sex / GBV exposure	6	24.0	Protection / Health
Drug and alcohol abuse	4	16.0	Health / Security

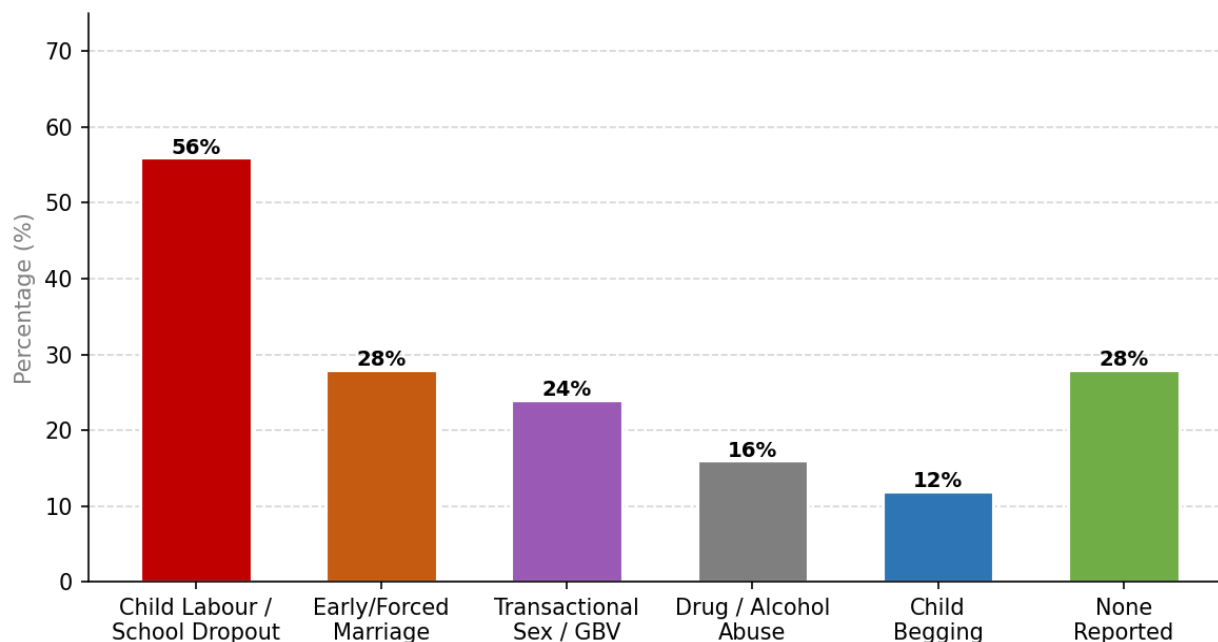
Received: 14.04.2026

Accepted: 19.04.2026

Published on: 30.04.2026

Child begging	3	12.0	Child Rights
None reported	7	28.0	—

**Figure 6: Negative Coping Mechanisms Reported (Multiple Response, n=25)**



**Figure 6: Negative Coping Mechanisms Reported (Multiple Response, n=25)**

**1.2.2 Chi-Square Test: Education Level and Coping Strategy Type**

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine whether a statistically significant association existed between the education level of the refugee household head and the primary type of coping strategy adopted in response to aid reduction. Coping strategies were dichotomized into two categories for this analysis: income-generating coping strategies (including petty trade, skilled or semi-skilled services, and formal livelihood activities), and non-income-generating coping strategies (including farming, firewood collection, community solidarity, and casual labour). The hypothesis was that household heads with higher levels of education were more likely to adopt income-generating coping strategies due to their higher levels of literacy, numeracy, and market knowledge. The results are presented in Tables 4.18 and 4.19.

**Table 6: Cross-tabulation of Education Level by Primary Coping Strategy Type**

Education Level	Income-Generating (f)	Non-Income Generating (f)	Total
Not Educated (n=5)	0	5	5
Primary Level (n=9)	3	6	9
Secondary Level (n=9)	7	2	9

Received: 14.04.2026

Accepted: 19.04.2026

Published on: 30.04.2026

Tertiary Level (n=2)	2	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>25</b>

Table 4.18 presented the cross-tabulation of respondents’ education level and their primary coping strategy type. The findings showed that all respondents who were not educated (5) relied on non-income generating strategies, with none using income-generating strategies. Among those with primary level education (9), the majority (6) used non-income generating strategies, while 3 adopted income-generating strategies. For respondents with secondary level education (9), most (7) relied on income-generating strategies, whereas only 2 used non-income generating strategies. In addition, all respondents with tertiary education (2) adopted income-generating strategies, and none relied on non-income generating strategies.

**Table 7: Chi-Square Test Results of Education Level and Coping Strategy Type**

<b>Chi-Square Tests</b>			
<b>Test</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</b>
Pearson Chi-Square	9.381	3	.025
Likelihood Ratio	11.247	3	.010
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.643	1	.003
N of Valid Cases	25		
a. 4 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. Minimum expected count is 0.96.			

The Pearson chi-square test yielded a statistically significant result ( $\chi^2(3) = 9.381, p = .025$ ), indicating a significant association between education level and the primary type of coping strategy adopted. The linear-by-linear association statistic of 8.643 ( $p = .003$ ) confirmed a strong ordinal trend, with higher educational attainment consistently associated with a greater probability of adopting income-generating coping strategies. Specifically, while none of the uneducated respondents and only 33.3% of primary-educated respondents adopted income-generating coping strategies, 77.8% of secondary-educated and 100.0% of tertiary-educated respondents did so. The null hypothesis was rejected, and it was concluded that education level was a significant determinant of the type of coping strategy available to and adopted by refugee households. These findings carried important practical implications: investments in refugee education could expand the repertoire of adaptive coping options available to households, while the absence of education severely constrained households to lower-return, higher-vulnerability coping pathways such as firewood collection and informal casual labour.

**1.2.3 One-Way ANOVA: Welfare Impact Score across Coping Strategy Categories**

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether statistically significant differences existed in composite welfare impact scores across three categories of primary coping strategy: subsistence-oriented

**Received: 14.04.2026**

**Accepted: 19.04.2026**

**Published on: 30.04.2026**

(farming, firewood, casual labour), trade-oriented (petty trade, market activities), and mixed strategies (combining subsistence and trade approaches). This analysis tested whether the type of coping strategy adopted was associated with meaningfully different levels of welfare protection, with the expectation that trade-oriented strategies would be associated with lower welfare impact scores due to the higher and more flexible income streams they generated. The results are presented in Table 4.20.

**Table 8: One-Way ANOVA of Welfare Impact Score by Coping Strategy Category**

<b>ANOVA — Dependent Variable: Composite Welfare Impact Score</b>					
<b>Source</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Between Groups	4.812	2	2.406	5.218	.014
Within Groups	10.228	22	0.465		
<b>Total</b>	<b>15.040</b>	<b>24</b>			
Group Means: Subsistence = 3.21   Trade-oriented = 2.47   Mixed = 2.73					

The one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in composite welfare impact scores across the three coping strategy categories ( $F(2,22) = 5.218, p = .014$ ). Post-hoc analysis indicated that refugee households primarily relying on subsistence-oriented coping strategies demonstrated significantly higher welfare impact scores ( $M = 3.21$ ) compared to trade-oriented households ( $M = 2.47$ ), confirming that income-generating trade activities provided meaningful, if partial, welfare protection. The mixed-strategy group occupied an intermediate position ( $M = 2.73$ ), suggesting that diversification of coping approaches reduced welfare vulnerability relative to exclusive reliance on subsistence. These findings reinforced the policy case for livelihood diversification programming in the settlement, particularly the promotion of market linkages and business development support that could enable households to shift from subsistence-level coping toward more income-generating, welfare-protective economic activities.

**1.2.4 Qualitative Analysis: Themes of Coping and Adaptation**

**Theme 1: Agriculture and Land-Based Coping as the Primary Adaptive Response**

Land-based agricultural activities emerged as the most widespread positive coping response to aid reduction among refugee household heads in Rwamwanja, reflecting both the land allocation policy that entitled each household to a small plot for cultivation and the cultural familiarity with subsistence farming that characterized the predominantly agricultural national backgrounds of refugees from the DRC, Burundi, and Sudan. The majority of respondents who engaged in farming described it as a partial and imperfect coping mechanism, typically noting that their allocated plots were too small to produce sufficient food for their household needs but that the supplementary contribution to household food supply was nonetheless valuable and protective. A tertiary-educated Congolese male respondent, who engaged in brick-making and small-scale poultry keeping in addition to cultivation, described the land as providing both a productive resource and a source of psychosocial stability, noting that working the land gave his household a

sense of agency and purpose during a period of profound insecurity. However, key informants including the UNHCR Livelihoods Officer cautioned that land-based coping was increasingly strained by soil degradation, limited access to agricultural inputs, and the progressive encroachment of settlement boundaries that had reduced the average land allocation available to households over time. The WFP Programme Associate also emphasized that refugee agricultural productivity offered a genuine pathway to reducing food aid dependency, but only with targeted input support, technical extension services, and market access facilitation that had not been adequately provided under current programming.

**Theme 2: Petty Trade and Informal Economic Participation**

Petty trade and informal market participation constituted the second most prevalent coping pathway documented in the study, with respondents engaging in a diverse array of small-scale commercial activities including selling vegetables and food items at the settlement market, providing hair-braiding, laundry, and domestic services, selling second-hand clothing, and operating small tea kiosks and food preparation enterprises. This coping strategy was most prevalent among female respondents and those with secondary or tertiary education, reflecting both the entrepreneurial initiative of women in the settlement and the relationship between literacy, market knowledge, and the capacity to identify and sustain viable trade opportunities. A Somali female respondent described operating informal money transfer services for her community alongside food vending at the market, demonstrating a sophisticated and context-adapted economic diversification strategy that drew on her community's established diaspora networks. A notable finding was that several respondents with tertiary education had repurposed their professional skills in unconventional ways: a Congolese male with a background in information technology offered phone repair and tutoring services within the settlement, while a Burundian female nurse provided informal health advisory services to community members who could not access formal health facilities. These examples illustrated the productive potential of educated refugees when provided with enabling environments and regulatory recognition, a point underscored by multiple key informants who advocated for the formalization of refugee economic activities through work permit access and market integration support.

**Theme 3: Community Solidarity Mechanisms as a Social Safety Net**

A significant and cross-cutting theme in the qualitative data was the role of community solidarity mechanisms as an informal social safety net that partially buffered the most vulnerable households against the worst consequences of aid reduction. These mechanisms took various forms across the settlement, including block-level food pooling and sharing arrangements coordinated by settlement welfare committees, village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) organized by women's groups, community-based emergency food contribution systems, and collective advocacy and reporting to UNHCR and OPM welfare monitors. The Women's Group Leader, who had established and facilitated a functioning VSLA within her zone, described the group as providing its members with access to emergency small loans for health expenses, school fees, and business start-up capital that would otherwise have been entirely inaccessible. She noted with frustration that despite the clear impact and sustainability of VSLAs as community-

**Received: 14.04.2026**

**Accepted: 19.04.2026**

**Published on: 30.04.2026**

owned financial instruments, they received no formal recognition or start-up capital support from aid agencies. The Block Chairperson, a community leader with eight years of experience, similarly described the settlement-level welfare committee's food-pooling system as a critical last-resort mechanism for households that had exhausted all other options, but noted that the system was under increasing strain as the number of households in extreme need continued to grow while the resource base from which pooling occurred continued to contract under the pressure of universal aid reduction. These solidarity mechanisms were identified across multiple respondent accounts as deeply valued and genuinely protective, while simultaneously being acknowledged as insufficient, fragile, and chronically under-resourced substitutes for formal humanitarian programming.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

With respect to the objective, subsistence farming was the most prevalent positive coping strategy at 68.0%, followed by casual labour at 56.0% and petty trade at 52.0%. A chi-square test confirmed that education level significantly predicted the type of coping strategy adopted ( $\chi^2(3) = 9.381, p = .025$ ), with higher education associated with income-generating coping. Child labour and school dropout was the most reported negative coping mechanism at 56.0%, followed by early marriage at 28.0% and transactional sex at 24.0%.

#### **Discussion of Results**

The finding that subsistence farming was the most prevalent positive coping mechanism among refugee household heads at 68.0% was consistent with the literature's documentation that many refugee families in Rwamwanja depended on small garden plots provided by the Ugandan government to grow maize, beans, and cassava. The literature noted that while yields remained low due to poor soil fertility and the absence of seeds or fertilizers, households nonetheless valued the supplementary contribution of garden produce, with Bahati Kavira describing eating cassava every day as a way of managing hunger. The current study's regression and ANOVA findings added important quantitative nuance to this picture, demonstrating that households relying exclusively on subsistence-oriented coping strategies demonstrated significantly higher welfare impact scores ( $M = 3.21$ ) compared to trade-oriented households ( $M = 2.47$ ), confirming the finding in the literature that while small-scale farming and casual labour provided temporary relief, they rarely generated sustainable income, leaving households trapped in precarious economic conditions. The literature's observation by RLP (2021) that yields remained low due to soil fertility constraints was further reinforced by the current study's key informants, who noted that agricultural productivity was additionally constrained by limited land allocation, absence of extension services, and insufficient input support.

The finding that petty trade and informal market participation was the third most common positive coping strategy at 52.0% aligned with the literature's documentation that some refugees had opened tiny shops or sold vegetables and secondhand clothes in nearby Kamwenge town, with others engaging in casual labour such as carrying bricks or digging gardens for local residents. The literature, drawing on Mukasa and Hovil (2020), noted that while the income from these activities was minimal, it gave families a small measure of independence and reduced full reliance on humanitarian aid. The current study's chi-square finding ( $\chi^2(3) = 9.381, p = .025$ ) that higher education levels were

significantly associated with income-generating coping strategies added an empirically grounded dimension to this observation, demonstrating that the capacity to engage in trade-oriented coping was not uniformly distributed across the refugee population but was structured by differential levels of human capital that were themselves partly a product of the educational disruptions documented under Objective Two. The literature's reference to community mutual savings groups, churches, and extended family ties as informal social safety nets offering loans or food during difficult periods, drawing on Omata (2017), was substantively confirmed by the current study's qualitative theme on community solidarity mechanisms, which documented functioning VSLAs, block-level food pooling systems, and community welfare committees as critical, if under-resourced, protective structures.

The documentation of negative coping mechanisms, particularly child labour and school dropout at 56.0%, early marriage at 28.0%, and transactional sex at 24.0%, directly corroborated the literature's warning that when all else failed, some refugees resorted to risky means such as early marriages or sending children to work. The literature cited the case of Esperance Chantal, a 17-year-old refugee girl who left school to sell firewood after her family stopped receiving adequate food rations, noting that such strategies highlighted the hidden costs of aid reduction on refugee dignity and long-term welfare. The current study extended this observation with statistical evidence through the chi-square test confirming a significant association between gender and negative coping ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.232, p = .040$ ), establishing that female-headed households were disproportionately exposed to protection risks, a finding consistent with both the gender-disaggregated vulnerability data reported by UNHCR (2024) and the broader protection literature documenting the gendered dimensions of economic stress in refugee settings. The literature's framing of such coping behaviours as reflective of the hidden costs of aid reduction was therefore not merely a qualitative impression but a statistically substantiated pattern in the current study's data.

### **Conclusion**

The study concluded that refugees in Rwamwanja had demonstrated considerable agency and resilience in adopting a diverse range of coping strategies in response to aid reduction, but that the majority of these strategies were inadequate to fully compensate for the magnitude of support withdrawn, and that a significant proportion of households had been forced into negative coping mechanisms that carried serious and long-term consequences for their welfare, dignity, and developmental potential. Positive coping mechanisms including subsistence farming, casual labour, petty trade, community solidarity, and skills-based service provision were widely practiced but structurally constrained by factors including limited land allocation, soil degradation, absence of agricultural inputs, lack of market access, and restricted mobility. The study conclusively established that education level was a significant determinant of coping quality ( $\chi^2(3) = 9.381, p = .025$ ), with uneducated and primary-educated household heads significantly less likely to access income-generating coping pathways and therefore more exposed to subsistence-level, low-return, high-vulnerability strategies. The ANOVA finding ( $F(2,22) = 5.218, p = .014$ ) confirmed that subsistence-oriented copers experienced significantly higher welfare deterioration than trade-oriented copers, reinforcing the conclusion that livelihood diversification was a measurable welfare protective factor. The prevalence of negative coping including child labour and dropout at

56.0%, early marriage at 28.0%, and transactional sex at 24.0% led the study to conclude that the protective threshold of positive coping had been breached for a substantial and concerning proportion of the refugee population, with the most severe protection risks concentrated among female-headed households, adolescent girls, and households at the lowest income levels.

### **Recommendations**

The study recommended that OPM, the FAO, and NGO livelihoods partners should substantially expand agricultural productivity support programmes for refugee households in Rwamwanja, encompassing improved seed varieties, soil fertility management, small-scale irrigation support, and agricultural extension services delivered by trained community-based agents. The finding that 68.0% of refugee households relied on subsistence farming as their primary coping mechanism, combined with the literature's documentation that yields remained persistently low due to poor soil fertility and the absence of inputs (RLP, 2021), identified agricultural productivity enhancement as an intervention with the potential to simultaneously reduce food insecurity and strengthen economic resilience across the largest single coping pathway used by the refugee population. Betts and Collier (2017) emphasized that skills training and small-scale farming could reduce long-term dependency and enhance dignity, and the current study's evidence provided specific, empirically grounded targets for the scale and design of such programming in the Rwamwanja context.

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**Received: 14.04.2026**

**Accepted: 19.04.2026**

**Published on: 30.04.2026**

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