

## **Information Behaviour of Refugees in North Western Uganda: Examining Approaches to Information Seeking and Use Behaviour Patterns Among South Sudanese Refugees**

Dr. Isaac Mukungu, Rogers Mukose, and Winnie Musuya, three librarians from Busitema University, worked with professor Patrick Ngulube from the University of South Africa to understand how South Sudanese refugees in Uganda find and use information. Their study was published in the journal *Education for Information* and focused on Bidi Bidi refugee settlement in Yumbe District, Northwestern Uganda, one of the largest refugee settlements in the world with over 200,000 registered refugees who fled conflict in South Sudan. Uganda hosts over 1.8 million refugees, the most of any country in Africa, but very little research has examined how these displaced populations seek and use information to survive and rebuild their lives.

The research team spent four months in Bidi Bidi from March to June 2024, using interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation to gather data from 50 refugees and 10 refugee administrators. Two questions guided the work: what patterns of information seeking behaviour exist among refugees, and how do refugees use the information they find? The answers reveal a complex picture of active and passive information seeking and use behaviour, covert and open behaviour, and a range of ways that information is shared, validated, and sometimes withheld.

Some refugees were active seekers and thus ask neighbours, approach church leaders, visit the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) desk in the settlement, and knock on the doors of aid organisations, moving from one source to the next when the first fails. One mother described searching for information on treatment for her sick child by going from one health organisation to another until she found help, while a young person looking for a scholarship would badger a pastor, then check at the youth centre, then ask a friend with internet access. Urgency and the value attached to information sought drove these active seekers forward and their persistence continued even when doors close.

Passive seeking tells a different story. Some refugees do not go looking for information at all and instead let it arrive to them through village meeting announcements, overheard neighbour conversations, or a nearby radio. Some refugees have given up entirely because asking brought nothing before, no feedback, no answer, no help, so the asking stopped. One participant said, ***"I am tired, I am very tired. Because there is nothing,"*** a sentiment the researchers call information search retraction, a withdrawal from the seeking process that leaves people without the information they need.

The study uncovered patterns rarely seen in academic literature, including covert information seeking that happens in secret, alone or in small groups. Women facing domestic violence quietly band together to ask for help without attracting attention, and refugees who fear for their lives due to political targeting in South Sudan seek resettlement information privately, telling only family and close friends. This covert seeking, especially when done collaboratively, is not well documented in information seeking behaviour. Group seeking also occurs openly when refugees share a common need, a behaviour pattern that is very supportive to those who are shy, afraid, or struggle with language barriers. In some cases one person would be persuaded to seek information on behalf of others and then share what was found, a pattern called persuasive information seeking.

When information is obtained, refugees put it to practical use in their daily lives. Some refugee school going children use library resources to complete assignments and prepare for exams, traders check market prices on social media or through friends and then bargain harder with merchants from Arua, and health information leads to treatment while job information leads to work. Spiritual information, words from a pastor or a verse from scripture, gives some refugees hope.

Information sharing happens constantly among refugees, as neighbours tell neighbours, friends tell friends, and families tell families, but sharing has limits. Sensitive information about persecution, resettlement applications, or abuse stays within small trusted circles, and some refugees validate information before using or passing it on. Refugee leaders especially double-check news from social media or radio because spreading it as false information damages reputation of the leader. One leader said, ***"If you are fed with wrong information, you find yourself also feeding people with false information which tarnishes your image and is very risky."***

The researchers recommend that refugee service providers design information dissemination strategies that serve all types of seekers, including passive, covert, and those who have withdrawn from seeking. Further studies on collaborative information seeking, digital literacy in refugee settlements, and information poverty among displaced populations are needed. The study appears in *Education for Information*, a SAGE journal, and represents the work of three Busitema University librarians and a South African scholar asking a simple, overlooked question: how do people who have lost everything find the information needed to start again?