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February 2024





The Population Council Inc. leads the Baobab Research Program Consortium in close partnership with the Population Council Kenya and the African Population and Health Research Center. Situated in the East and Horn of Africa, this Africa-based and African-led consortium is filling critical evidence gaps to reduce inequities in sexual reproductive health and rights among vulnerable populations in humanitarian settings.

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Background

One of the more notable successes of the [Baobab Research Programme Consortium \(RPC\)](#) has been its intentional engagement of refugees and host community members in various aspects of its research and intervention implementation activities, including, community entry and engagement, training workshops, and data collection. Baobab's effective and consistent engagement with stakeholders and beneficiaries is at the heart of the programme's approach. The RPC has employed several practices including working closely with state departments or agencies mandated to protect refugees, national and regional United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) officials, and their implementing partners in various research and intervention activities; joining the membership of existing technical working groups and local advisory boards in refugee settings; and, working with refugee welfare councils, to both create awareness about Baobab's work and receive input on study activities from beneficiaries. Baobab's efforts are further supported by progressive refugee policies and best practices in Uganda and Ethiopia, focusing on integration and access to services, and which are supportive of the inclusion of refugees in the delivery of such services and activities in refugee settlements.

Additionally, the RPC's capacity building strategy is geared towards building a network in the region that can drive and conduct rigorous research on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in humanitarian settings, along with the effective communication and utilisation of research products to ensure that investments, policies, and programmes implemented in these settings are informed by high-quality evidence. Baobab's approach to capacity building facilitates the establishment of structures that will promote effective local leadership by drawing upon synergistic alliances with partners who have similar interests.

As a result of this, in Uganda, 175 community members (73% female and 27% male) with (34% refugees and 66% host community members) were recruited and trained to collect data for a formative study of violence against children and youth in refugee settlements in Uganda as team leaders, research assistances, or study coordinators, between February and April of 2022. These recruits played other supportive roles including survey tool review, translation, and contextualization, leading up to, during, and after the actual data collection.

Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS) are led by national governments with technical assistance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as part of the Together for Girls (TfG) partnership. These surveys have documented the magnitude and prevalence of physical, emotional, and sexual violence against children in more than 20 low- and middle-income countries, with a view to inform national prevention and response programs¹. Despite the precedent for understanding the extent of VAC from the perspectives of adolescents and pre-adolescent children, interest in systematic documentation of similar experiences of children in humanitarian settings is just emerging,

¹ Chiang, L.F., Kress, H., Sumner, S.A., Gleckel, J., Kawemama, P., and Gordon, R.N. 2016. "Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS): towards a global surveillance system." *BMJ Injury Prevention* 22 (Issue Suppl 1):1-16.

following the development of guidance for the implementation of the VACS in such contexts². The first-ever VACS conducted in a humanitarian context was led by the Baobab RPC in refugee settlements in Uganda and was titled the ‘Uganda Humanitarian Violence Against Children and Young People Survey (Uganda HVACS)’. The second VACS conducted in a humanitarian context was also led by Baobab in refugee camps in Ethiopia and was titled the ‘Ethiopia HVACS’.

The Baobab RPC’s 2022-2023 annual review included a recommendation for the RPC to review the experience of including refugees and host community members in data collection training workshops, and to assess the value and viability of replicating this approach. While our approach to the engagement of refugees and host community members in various research and intervention implementation activities is broad, herein, we specifically explore the unique experience of conducting data collection training workshops with refugees and host community members ahead of the Ethiopian Humanitarian Violence Against Children and Young People Survey (HVACS) conducted between December 2023 and February 2024. We report on post-training evaluation responses and interviews with participants during a training workshop that was held in November 2023.

Methods

Our approach included an analysis of responses from a post-training evaluation survey that was shared with all participating trainees at the end of a three-week training period, complemented by semi-structured interviews with a select number of trainers and trainees.

Post-training evaluation

Participants: An anonymous online questionnaire was shared with all trainees (comprising refugees, host community members, Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS) representatives, and other participants not drawn from/around the refugee settlements) on the last day of the workshop. This questionnaire was completed by all 79 trainees.

Format: The online questionnaire was administered on the last day of the training and featured a mix of Likert-scale type, yes/no, and an open-ended question. Participants were encouraged to use their personal electronic devices such as phones to complete the questionnaire, facilitating ease of access and immediate response collection.

² Chiang, L., Fernandez, B., Falb, K., Massetti, G., Ligiero, D., and Behnam, N.. 2020. *Measuring Violence Against Children in Humanitarian Settings: Implementation Guidance for a Humanitarian Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (HVACS)*. Washington, DC: Together for Girls.

Analysis: Data from the online questionnaire was analyzed using Excel. This analysis aimed to quantify the responses, providing a description of the responses.

Semi-structured interviews

Participants: A Baobab researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected group of seven individuals (both trainers and trainees). This group comprised three refugees, two host community members, and two Baobab RPC trainers/researchers responsible for facilitating the workshops.

Approach: These interviews took place in the final week of the training program. The aim was to explore perceptions and experiences regarding the value and replicability of including refugees and host community members in data collection training workshops.

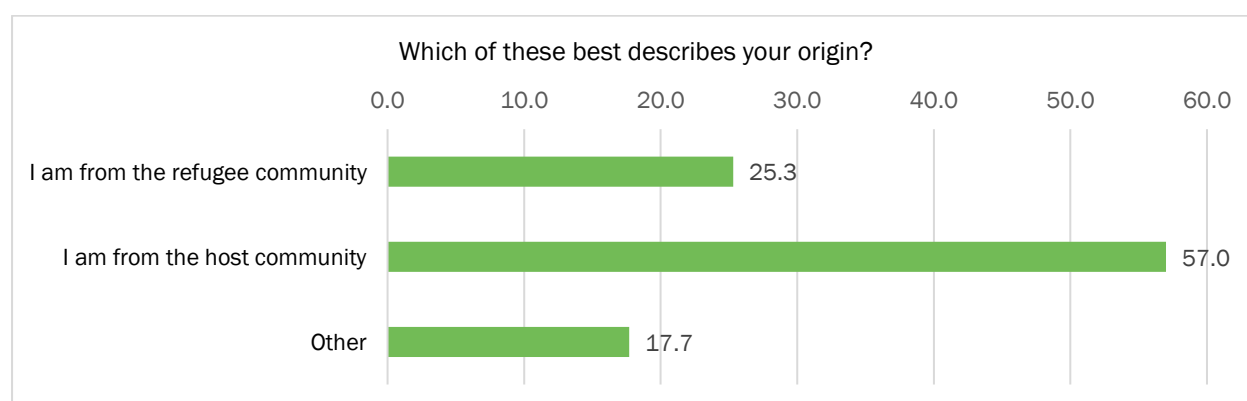
Analysis: The content of these interviews was analyzed thematically. This involved an iterative process of reviewing and re-reviewing responses to ensure that emerging themes accurately reflected the trainees' and trainers' perspectives and experiences.

Findings

Engagement of refugees and host community members

The post-training evaluation yielded insightful feedback from 79 respondents brought on to take on different roles including team leaders, research assistants, and study coordinators (57% male and 43% female). A quarter (25%) were from refugee communities and 57% from host communities, with the category of 'others' comprising five RRS representatives and participants not drawn from/around the refugee settlements. These respondents would be engaged in data collection as team leaders or research assistants.

Figure 1: Origins of the trainees



The semi-structured interviews conducted with trainees and Baobab trainers provided nuanced insights into the dynamics of including refugees and host community members in the research. A particularly noteworthy aspect highlighted by the trainers was their advocacy for the recruitment and inclusion of local talent from the designated

communities for engagement in data collection and other research activities. They stressed the inherent capacity-building advantages of such participation and its role in cultivating local expertise and engagement. This approach effectively served the dual purpose of ensuring that qualified refugees were proactively identified and engaged in research in their own communities, while simultaneously building their confidence and capabilities in research through establishing valuable connections with content experts and a broadening of their networks.

Across the interviews, a recurring theme that emerged was the value of diversity in the engagement of individuals from the communities, as an important aspect of building trust and familiarity, and overcoming language barriers, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

"The integration of local researchers from host and refugee communities into our data collection process offers several advantages. While there may be benefits to using trained RAs [research assistants] from outside [the community], working with locals has its unique strengths. One key advantage is the buy-in it creates. These local participants often have a deep understanding of the community's dynamics and how things operate within their settings. While RAs from outside might bring technical expertise and require less training, they often lack this contextual understanding and the community buy-in that is so crucial for our work. This is particularly true for those from refugee settlements who might be new to data collection or unfamiliar with certain tools like ODK... However, their insight into the community context is invaluable." Trainer, Baobab Researcher

Prior and current engagement in research

A large majority (81%) of the trainees indicated having prior involvement in research project data collection, and 71% reported engagement in other aspects of research beyond data collection, such as participating in interviews and supporting the dissemination of findings, both an indication that the practice of engaging community members in research and data collection is becoming more conventional.

These findings were supported by the semi-structured interviews, with all trainees (refugees and host community members) interviewed reporting that they had been involved in prior research activities. Several also indicated that this current training would be useful to them in their current positions in the communities, with some working in sectors including mental health, family planning, and as public/community health officers. Another common observation from interviewees was that the current training was lengthy and detailed, allowing the teams ample time to delve into the complexities of the different lines of enquiry.

"Yeah, as a refugee, I have had a (lengthy) period of experiencing the refugee situation. And I also have different experiences with data collection for different organizations. The difference with this training is that it digs out all the data... This study, it is very important because of how you train us. It is helpful for data collection, for our knowledge, and for us as we could add to the community even after we finish data collection... That's why it is very important." Trainee, Research Assistant, Refugee

"Already, I'm trained as a family physician. I am concerned when it [violence] happens to my patient... In the camp, I'm a volunteer in the health center... This course will help me

even with my skills. It [the training] is up to date and it's going to improve the whole community.” Trainee, Research Assistant, Refugee

Value of engagement in research training workshops

The post-training evaluation also explored participants' perceptions of the value of any previous research training as well as the current training they had received. As shown in Figure 2, 83% of the respondents deemed their previous research training as ‘very useful’ (73%) or ‘somewhat useful’ (10%), while all the respondents (100%) rated the current training as ‘very useful’ (97%) or ‘somewhat useful’ (3%) for both strengthening their capacity to undertake research and encouraging their involvement in research within their own communities.

Figure 2: Responses when asked how valuable the trainees found previous training

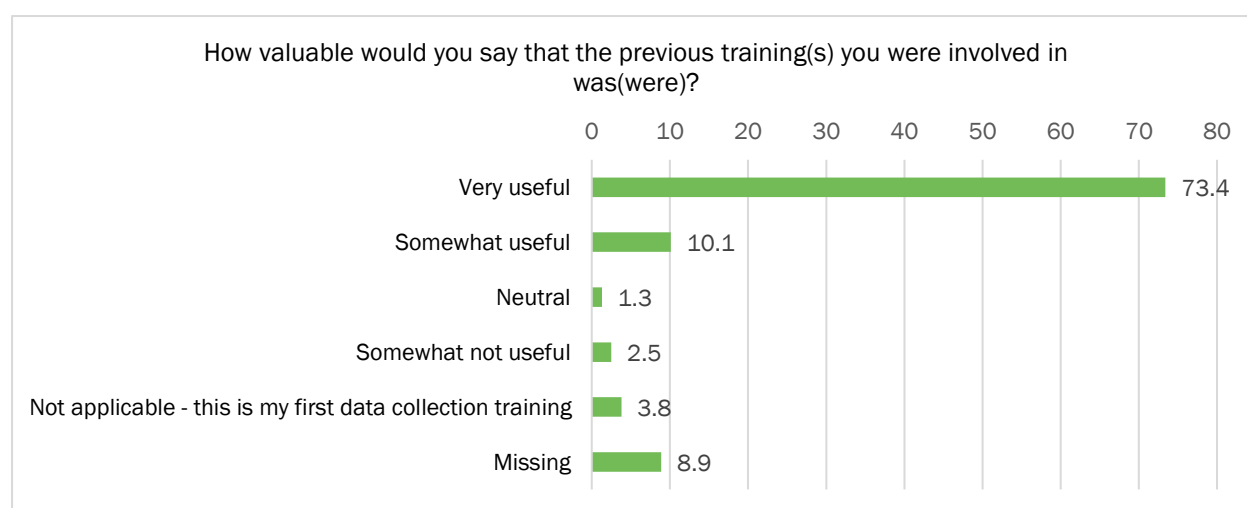


Figure 3: Word cloud with descriptors of their training experience



When asked how they would describe the training in their own words, we found descriptors from the trainees indicating that they found the workshop interesting, useful, fantastic,

effective, excellent, and knowledge imparting, with several expressing how happy or glad they were about the opportunity to be involved in the training workshop.

These findings were complemented by results from the semi-structured interviews. Trainees expressed that the chance to participate in the current research activity was uncommon yet highly valued. They reflected on typical studies in their settings where external researchers would collect data relying on translators and thereafter leave once data collection was completed, and how the approach of this research project was different. Baobab would allow the trainees to contribute directly to research impacting their communities. This experience notably offered them a deeper understanding of topics under investigation and research methodologies more broadly, with those from the refugee community acknowledging the rarity of such opportunities. Several of the trainees also noted that being from these communities and working in various health-related sectors made them aware of the widespread nature of childhood violence, despite the lack of documentation. They remarked that the findings from the survey would be particularly useful, providing important insights to inform programs and policies aimed at addressing and ending violence against children in humanitarian settings.

"...the most important aspect of this early training is the knowledge it imparts. This knowledge, now that I've acquired it, will be invaluable for conducting research in the future. It's all about what I've learned here, which will enable me to do that. I often think, if I hadn't been taught this science by participating in this training, how would I have gained this knowledge? So, this is really what stands out to me about the training." Trainee, Team Leader, Refugee

"So, for example, I got this opportunity. I didn't expect to get this kind of thing [invitation to participate in the training] because getting it, and even travelling to the capital city to meet with diverse people is too difficult [rare] in my region because of many things... I wouldn't have been selected otherwise." Trainee, Research Assistant, Host Community Member

Another of the more lauded approaches undertaken by the Baobab RPC was the engagement of gender-based violence caseworkers. Implementing partners in charge of child protection and gender-based violence service provision in the refugee settings identified caseworkers – providing psychosocial support to young GBV survivors – who were incorporated into each data collection team and accompanied these teams throughout the fieldwork period, providing counselling and referral services to study participants requiring it.

"Incorporating GBV caseworkers is key and especially when addressing sensitive topics and trauma. It's a resource-intensive but crucial strategy for our project. This approach not only offers immediate support to participants, but also ensures continued assistance beyond the study. For many of the interviewees [survivors], this may be their first opportunity to speak out [about their experiences] and receive help." Trainer, Baobab Researcher

Navigating and adapting to challenges

The project's unique refugee and host community context presented specific challenges, as anticipated by the training facilitators and highlighted during interviews with Baobab

trainers. One of the primary challenges was recruiting qualified researchers from refugee communities, compounded by the hurdles of language and communication barriers. In some instances, refugees recruited from one community or territory would not be allowed entry into other communities or territories due to existing tribal conflict, hindering rotation and engagement of teams beyond their communities.

Despite initial concerns about the feasibility of finding qualified individuals within these communities, the Baobab team effectively addressed these challenges, and a key to their success lay in the implementation of a rigorous recruitment process, tailored to identify and onboard the most suitable candidates from diverse backgrounds.

"We do recognize that the qualifications and the capacity of the refugees might be a challenge, given their diverse backgrounds and varying education systems. Communication and language barriers are challenges we've witnessed. However, this does not imply that they [trainees] lack the capability to perform effectively in this job [data collection]. The key is identifying individuals with at least an advanced level of education and relevant qualifications. Through our experience, we've come to realize that among the refugees, there are indeed qualified individuals." Trainer, Baobab Researcher

The trainers further acknowledged that the extensive training played a crucial role in overcoming trainee capacity concerns. The length and depth of the training provided ample opportunity for participants to gain necessary skills and understand the content of the survey tools. Trainee involvement in translation of the research tools into local languages served to deepen their comprehension of the tools, imparting a more nuanced understanding of the research themes and how they would best be understood in the contexts in which the work would be undertaken. One trainer elaborated on this point:

"Despite any challenges in implementation, having co-trainers who are well-versed in the local language and familiar with the community's context can greatly facilitate the training. This approach goes beyond simply taking in data collectors from these communities. It's about involving them in a way that enriches the whole process." Trainer, Baobab Researcher

Discussion and reflections on value and replicability

Our findings underscored the benefits of integrating refugees and host community members into the data collection training phase of the Ethiopia HVACS. Firstly, the approach ensured the capacity building and empowerment of community members through the provision of training on research methodology and SRHR content, enabling them to conduct successful and high-quality data collection for the current study and future projects. Secondly, was the extent to which this strategy secured community buy-in, leveraging the unique insights of those with first-hand experience navigating the often-challenging terrains of humanitarian settings. Thirdly, while recruiting competent individuals from these communities to support research activities may be resource and time-intensive, the RPC contributed to the Ethiopia's progressive refugee policies and best practices which are centered on integration.

Taken together, the success and positive impact of this participatory approach strongly suggest the value of its application in similar contexts. Nonetheless, as future implementation is contemplated, it becomes evident that context-specific adaptations are essential to enhance the replicability of this model. These adaptations should include more localized content and a broader range of language offerings to address specific community needs.

Significant challenges described earlier included language barriers and the differing contexts where trainees were recruited from. Various suggestions were put forth to mitigate the challenges encountered by the trainers. One proposed solution was the introduction of co-trainers, ideally sourced from these local communities or, at the very least, individuals fluent in the local languages. This strategy would go beyond recruiting data collectors from these communities, and rather, involve leveraging their expertise to clarify terminology and facilitate effective training, further contributing to a co-design approach as intentionally fostered with local refugee communities and other stakeholders by the Baobab RPC.

The success of the Ugandan HVACS, where this model was initially applied, provided a solid foundation and put forward learnings for a similar approach in Ethiopia. Delivering a training workshop that was culturally and linguistically sensitive and diverse, interactive, and immersive, and that involved host and refugee community members in aspects such as tool translation, enhanced the trainees' engagement and deepened their understanding of the research topics. This approach resonated profoundly with both trainees and trainers alike.

Conclusion

The findings from the post-training evaluation and semi-structured interviews demonstrated the significant value of involving refugee and host community members, not only as participants but also as active contributors in the research process. This approach has garnered the optimism of trainees and trainers alike, indicating its potential applicability in future projects and similar contexts. This approach also aligns with a broader localization agenda in humanitarian efforts, demonstrating that methodologies tailored to specific community needs and involving local talent could potentially lead to more impactful and sustainable outcomes. The success of the Ugandan HVACS, coupled with these promising findings following a HVACS training workshop in Ethiopia, are a testament to the effectiveness of localized training models in diverse humanitarian settings and highlights the value of immersive and interactive community involvement in research.