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January 6th, 2025

A lack of funding is forcing humanitarian agencies to prioritise

In response to restricted funding, humanitarian actors are having to prioritise where to deploy their resources. Charlotte Brown and Costanza Torre delve into the policy.

The deepening divide between the rising numbers of displaced people worldwide and the decreasing availability of humanitarian resources has become increasingly concerning. Agencies are therefore having to develop strategies for the efficient allocation of resources. Food aid is the biggest financial expense among humanitarian interventions, and so prioritising food assistance for those who need it most seems like common sense. The question is whose needs matter more and how you allocate resources effectively.

For years, agencies like the World Food Programme (WFP) have responded to dwindling resources with blanket cuts to food aid. However, the WFP and the UNHCR are now championing a more nuanced approach—shifting from “one-size-fits-all” cuts to need-based support. This change means fewer resources for financially stable households and more targeted support for the most vulnerable. This sounds like good news – a step toward a fairer, more thoughtful humanitarian effort. For many donors, prioritisation is a silver bullet. It is seen as a workaround for protracted displacement for populations that have overstayed their welcome on the humanitarian roster.

However, prioritisation reflects the reality of the limited and uneven distribution of humanitarian funding. Severe shortfalls in funding affect organisations’ operational capabilities and mean that even those in obvious need will not get all the help they require. As donors push for streamlined, “efficient” humanitarian support systems, difficult choices drive the allocation of existing resources.

Uganda hosts more refugees than any other country in Africa. In-country offices of WFP and UNHCR find themselves steering prioritisation efforts. They have to navigate extremely challenging questions around implementation. To do so, they need to identify the ‘most’ vulnerable in Uganda

where 91 per cent of the refugee population is highly economically vulnerable, gather rigorous evidence despite staff cuts, and rely on existing datasets in the face of rapidly changing circumstances.

Uganda's open-door refugee policy has often been praised internationally. However, severe funding shortfalls and increasing demands for reform have resulted in a hastily implemented and poorly communicated prioritisation process, with severe implications for refugees.

Households have been categorised according to vulnerability. Category One households receive 60 per cent of their food from aid; Category Two, receives 30 per cent; Category Three is cut off from food assistance. This process has been fraught.

Decisions on vulnerability resource allocation should take account of local factors that shape forcibly displaced people's lives and livelihoods – including location, household size, dependency ratios at the household level, and duration of funding shortfalls, among others.

Problems on the ground

In Uganda, this decision-making is being undermined by staffing cuts and time pressure. This profoundly affects organisational operations and the data on which they base vital decisions regarding resource allocation. Collecting accurate and up-to-date information on refugee households' socio-economic circumstances is expensive and requires reliable inter-agency coordination and rigorous fieldwork practices. Crucially, people's situations can change rapidly, so even seemingly accurate data has a limited shelf-life in situations of profound financial precarity.

When mistakes are made, limited staff funding limits the appeals mechanisms. Based on deeply flawed calculations, people are frequently mistakenly cut off from food assistance, and no method of arbitration.

Worrying indicators point to rising rates of malnutrition, medical dropouts, school dropouts and family breakdown. The mishandling of the prioritisation process has severely undermined relations between the agencies and beneficiary populations. Prioritisation has reflected and compounded well-established problems. As countries within and beyond East Africa develop their prioritisation strategies, crucial lessons must be learned from Uganda.

It is essential to reflect on the global inequalities driving the funding shortfalls upon which prioritisation is justified. In 2023, five emergencies attracted nearly half of global humanitarian funding. Meanwhile, most countries currently involved in some form of prioritisation exercise are in Africa, where longstanding and **protracted displacement situations remain consistently overlooked and underfunded**. The demands for prioritisation reflect the uneven attention given to conflicts worldwide.

Prioritisation is not a panacea. In long-overlooked crises, far from promoting protection mechanisms, prioritisation entrenches existing vulnerabilities and creates new forms of precarity. If donors and political leaders are invested in long-term regional stability, they must get serious about accountability for the impacts of these measures. This means investing in independent evaluations of interventions and in-depth social science research to understand the local realities of intervention implementation. Strategies for redistributing available resources must be based on indicators co-produced at the grassroots level in genuine and continuous dialogue with refugee communities. Calls for a reduction in assistance must be replaced with a push towards widespread humanitarian system reform.

This article is part of the #prioritisation blog series, which builds on the SSHAP policy brief on [Food Assistance Prioritisation in Uganda and its Impacts](#).

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Posted In: International Affairs | Policy



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