Cementing key partnerships to foster the use of evidence in humanitarian settings: Baobab Case Study Three

The Baobab Research Programme Consortium

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Case Study Three

Outcome Description: Number of new partnerships and networks forged that foster the utilisation of evidence

Cementing key partnerships to foster the use of evidence in humanitarian settings

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Introduction

The name ‘Baobab’ encapsulates the characteristics that the Research Programme Consortium (RPC) envisages for the programme. The Baobab tree, thought to be of African origin, is strong, enduring, resilient, adaptable, and expansive. Similarly, when conceptualising the programme, the RPC team envisioned a programme that would be African-led, health-promoting, and one which would provide long-lasting results. The programme is fully rooted in the East and the Horn of Africa (EHA), and aligned with the localisation agenda, whilst utilising internationally benchmarked methods and tools in the research.

Baobab is aiming to produce a coherent body of high-quality policy and programme-relevant evidence to address some of the most critical sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) concerns among vulnerable refugee populations in the EHA region. Developing strong partnerships so that the evidence produced is utilised to inform policies, guidelines, investments, strategies and actions to improve the SRHR of refugees is a cornerstone of the Baobab RPC.

In summary, Baobab’s approach to developing partnerships includes:

- A commitment to connection and complementarity with partners;
- Building trust and listening to partners;
- Maintaining respect, patience, and perseverance in relationship building;
- Being embedded in the target context (all RPC members are based in the region), which fosters deep contextual understanding;
- Flexibility and adaptability to changes within partners and the context; and,
- A dedication to utilising evidence to inform and affect change.

“We were intentional about research uptake, engaging with the stakeholders from the get-go. Evidence is important, but it is not enough to open the floodgates for you. You need to gain entry first, building trust and establishing relationships to help partners to understand that you are not there to just extract and leave. Partners make this clear early on, that they want to know what you’re leaving behind. I like that they have been upfront with us. But when they then see the evidence, it becomes exciting to them that they have been a part of the process. Some key partnerships have taken a year or more to forge. Relationship building takes time.” Chi-Chi Undie, Baobab Research Director

Impact

- Strong, lasting partnerships with key players working in refugee settings in Uganda.
- Value of Baobab’s research in humanitarian settings in Uganda widely recognised by partners.
• Partners utilising Baobab evidence in SRHR interventions for refugees, and including Baobab studies in humanitarian sector workplans.

• Strong partnerships with Baobab have led to new, and strengthened, partnerships between key humanitarian stakeholders.

Pathways to Change

Enabler One: Strong Foundations

When the Baobab RPC began, the Population Council, Inc. had an existing technical cooperation agreement with the UNHCR Regional Bureau for the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes (EHAGL) with a focus on improving humanitarian sector field capacity to initiate appropriate interventions related to SRHR. The RPC built on the agreement, stoking UNHCR involvement and ownership by inviting them to play a catalytic role, forging relationships between Baobab and the UNHCR Uganda country operation, and identifying strategic opportunities. Baobab further developed a longstanding partnership with the Office of the Prime Minister, Department of Refugees – the government entity responsible for all refugee-related administrative matters, and for coordinating inter-ministerial and non-governmental activities related to refugees. Both partnerships, alongside others, have significantly helped to foster the use of Baobab’s evidence since the programme began.

Despite periods when the Population Council did not have funding for research on SRHR in refugee settings, it continued to nurture its connections with the UNHCR as Chi-Chi Undie, Baobab Research Director explains:

“We have maintained relationships with UNHCR at the regional level over the years, regardless of funding. Very early on in Baobab, at the proposal development stage, UNHCR were involved in our initial conversations and when we were awarded the Baobab grant, we were a part of UNHCR’s regional plans straight away. We gained entry into UNHCR Uganda country offices through the Regional Bureau.”

The trust and respect between UNHCR staff and the RPC meant that even though there were personnel changes at UNHCR, the partnership was maintained. Katie Ogwang, from the UNHCR Regional Bureau describes how she sees the partnership with Baobab:

“... it’s based on mutual respect, trust and is very collaborative when we work with their team. Chi-Chi is a very strong ally. With the current funding environment UNHCR has limited resources and thus cannot undertake a comprehensive and robust study. Therefore, we are prioritising the collaboration with [Baobab]. I can see this partnership continuing in 2024 and beyond given the necessity for evidence-based programming towards interventions for forcibly displaced women and children.”
In 2022, the UNHCR Regional Bureau began working to update the TCA, seeing the need to widen the scope of the partnership to cover SRHR issues more broadly. Discussions on the updated TCA include further considerations about forums and spaces provided by the Regional Bureau where Baobab could channel the dissemination of emerging evidence.

The partnership with the UNHCR Regional Bureau led to a new partnership with UNHCR Uganda, which resulted in support to the RPC from five UNHCR implementing partners during the data collection process for Baobab’s first study – the Uganda Humanitarian Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (HVACS). The five implementing partners – Danish Refugee Council, Humanitarian Assistance and Development Services, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran World Federation, and Medical Teams International – provided psychosocial care, through case workers, to survey respondents. They accompanied field teams collecting data, ensuring that any individual needing immediate response could receive it. They also gave referrals for continued care beyond the data collection period. The implementing partners have remained connected to the Baobab RPC, including through their participation at the subsequent Data to Action workshop, where, with other partners, they utilised the evidence from the HVACS to identify priorities for programmes.

The partnership between UNHCR and Baobab has been mutually supportive, with the UNHCR Regional Bureau including Baobab activities in its work plans. A Consortium Advisory Group (CAG) member noted that UNHCR has long been calling for the ‘integration’ of refugees into national systems and that Baobab’s approach of intentionally engaging refugees and host community members in various aspects of its research and intervention implementation activities aligns with this. It also allows the knowledge creation process to be owned by those within Uganda’s refugee settlements, ensuring that the learnings are held by those who are most impacted:

“Sustainability is built-in through the fact that refugees are part and parcel of the work being done. The spin-off interventions that are coming up from Baobab’s studies mean that irrespective of which international partner is on the ground, the refugees are there, they are engaged, and they are the ones who are most impacted. For me, that is an element of sustainability, when you have the impacted people being part of the programming and the designing. While they may not be able to put a monetary tag on it, I believe that there is a cost-saving realised from building that kind of sustainability within the work that Baobab is doing. In the long run, it is really about social change.” Joanina Karugaba, Baobab CAG Member and Senior Inter-Agency Coordination Officer at the UNHCR Regional Bureau.

**Enabler Two: Understanding the Context, Knowing the Decision-Makers, and Keeping them Close**

The OPM Department of Refugees is the lead government agency responsible for the wellbeing of refugees in Uganda and is a critical decision-maker within refugee contexts. Baobab’s partnership with the OPM has eased the RPC’s entry into refugee settlements to
undertake various studies. The support from the OPM signals to other partners that Baobab’s research is valued by the country’s government agency responsible for refugees. This has precipitated support from various other government and non-governmental organisations, creating an avenue for the RPC evidence and interventions to inform national strategies in a sustainable way.

“This is the first time some of these robust surveys, that have been implemented elsewhere, are being carried out in refugee settings. When you are going into these settings, you can’t just walk in [to these settings]. You need partnerships with those responsible for overseeing refugee affairs, and there is a lot of work that goes into developing these relationships.” Stella Muthuri, Chief Executive Officer, Baobab RPC.

A key activity that further cemented the partnership with the OPM was the Data 2 Action (D2A) workshop in Kampala, Uganda in June 2023. The workshop was co-convened by the OPM and Baobab, with support from the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), UNHCR, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Together for Girls. Workshop participants included decision-/policymakers and implementing partners. The workshop focused on sharing the data from the HVACS, and collaboratively identifying priorities for programmes and policies, that responded to the findings.

“I value our partnership with Baobab. The studies they are conducting are very important. They think outside the box, and say, ‘Let’s see what is happening, around things like GBV against children and youth and unwanted pregnancies amongst refugee girls.’ We have learnt that there is a lot we need to do through the evidence from the HVACS. After the D2A workshop, some implementing partners have included interventions into this year’s annual plans, especially on violence against children and youth.” Darlson Kusasira, Senior Community Services Officer, OPM.

Being based in the region, the Baobab team understands the political context in Uganda, in refugee settings, and within humanitarian sector organisations. They have the capacity to observe and analyse how such organisations work, noticing the hierarchies, where the power is, what opportunities are available, when to push and when to hold back.

“Refugee settings are a political space. You must navigate the political terrain sensitively, understanding who has power, and which institutions have the authority to make key decisions. Our role can be quite political, and it takes a lot of energy to maintain the relationships, not treading on toes, unruffling feathers when they’ve been ruffled, so that the researchers can do the research, and the research uptake can happen.” Stella Muthuri, Chief Executive Officer, Baobab.

Listening to the needs of the OPM and other key partners, including them at all stages of the programme and responding to their suggestions and/or requests has strengthened Baobab’s partnership with them. It can be a long process, with roadblocks. Persistence is needed.
“It’s important to not only think of what Baobab wants to achieve. We need to hear what our partners are wanting to achieve, listen and see where there is alignment. When we know what they want, we can see where we align. We’ve also identified champions, those who are most enthusiastic within key organisations. We establish friendships with individual people within key organisations and we sustain them; we are always building relationships. Part of this involves listening to partners. The OPM wanted to their Regional Desk Officers to participate in our data collection trainings. We did this, and it helped us to gain legitimacy and entry into communities in each region when data collection began. At the D2A workshop, the OPM thought it would be beneficial to invite settlement commanders. We brought them into the workshop, and their understanding of the results is helpful now that we are embarking on intervention implementation in their settlements.”  
Chi-Chi Undie, Research Director, Baobab RPC.

**Enabler Three: Leaning on the Snowballing Effect of Good Partnerships**

It is a reality that partners on the ground and government agencies can be wary of new organisations. Their experience of seeing new, unfamiliar organisations coming into refugee settings with resources and programmes with a more transactional approach has made them guarded. Baobab’s approach - to ask partners what their priorities are – created further trust and respect. Taking time to find the alignment with partners such as the OPM and MGLSD builds a different kind of engagement.

Carrying out the research in every refugee setting in Uganda; training people, including refugees, in these settings to collect the data; involving them in dissemination of the findings and co-hosting, with the OPM, the D2A workshop; and co-authoring publications based on the data with key partners demonstrated the RPC’s thorough research, analysis and dissemination process, which contributed to high levels of trust and a commitment to work together.

The MGLSD partnership came out of Baobab’s invitation to the Ministry (following this recommendation by OPM) to deliver a key presentation at the D2A workshop. This resulted in robust participation in the D2A by MGLSD officials. Following the workshop, the MGLSD-Baobab relationship continued to bud, and has since culminated in a partnership focused on the school-based provision of psychosocial support services to child/adolescent survivors by Para Social Workers (PSWs) in Kiryandongo Settlement.

Partnerships with the Baobab RPC are in turn strengthening collaborations between humanitarian actors in Uganda. The D2A workshop brought together many representatives from the OPM, MGLSD and other stakeholders, providing an opportunity for them to work together to prioritise investments and programmes and how best to utilise the evidence in their current planning. Katie Ogwang from the UNHCR Regional Bureau recognised the value of the workshop, related to Baobab’s collaborations with government departments:
“The results from HVACS and the participation of government and other key stakeholders are critical to ensure alignment of interventions and effective use of resources amongst partners working in humanitarian settings.”

Darlson Kusasira, Senior Community Services Officer, OPM, concurs:

“This has opened up more partnerships for us. It has built the foundation for better collaboration between government agencies and departments and implementing partners. We are now working with MGLSD, the Ministry of Education and with the local government in Kiryandongo on the PSW pilot programme [a new, collaborative effort with Baobab].”

Lessons Learnt

- Developing partnerships that foster the utilisation of evidence is a long, non-linear process that requires perseverance and a creative, nimble, and respectful approach.

- Ensuring that key partners, such as the OPM and UNHCR, are at the forefront of sharing research findings, strengthens the likelihood of evidence being utilised in policies, guidelines, investments, strategies, and actions to improve the SRHR of children/adolescents and youth in refugee settings in Uganda.