

How to guide



Baobab

Generating Evidence to Enhance
Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
in Refugee Settings

Strengthening the use of sexual and reproductive health and rights evidence in refugee and humanitarian settings





Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Purpose of the guide:.....	2
About Baobab.....	2
The challenge	3
Baobab principles for research uptake	3
Research uptake in the real world: From survey, to services, to scale up.....	5
Looking to the future.....	6
Further reading.....	6

Purpose of the guide:

This guide provides conceptual and practical guidance on how to engage with stakeholders in refugee and humanitarian settings with the aim of encouraging the uptake of rigorous evidence on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). It is informed by five years of experience from Baobab, an FCDO-funded research programme consortium operating in Uganda and Ethiopia, with regional relevance.

Baobab has drawn on a model of stakeholder engagement that runs throughout the research cycle and has had considerable success in stimulating the use of research in policy and practice.

The learning in this guide could be adapted for many other humanitarian settings and it is hoped it will be of interest to communities, academics, implementers, and decision-makers who are grappling with the challenge of how to improve SRHR.

About Baobab

The global refugee crisis is one of the defining challenges of this century, with negative effects on the SRHR of refugees. Baobab works in the East and Horn of Africa, where nearly 6 million people face displacement, with the majority being women, children, and adolescents.

The Population Council Inc. leads Baobab, in partnership with Population Council Kenya and the African Population and Health Research Center. Together, they have brought rigorous, well-known SRHR surveys into refugee settings in Uganda and Ethiopia for the first time. These large-scale surveys on violence against children and adolescents, unsafe abortion, and unintended pregnancy draw upon existing, robust, well-regarded surveys. Baobab also supports the design and testing of context-appropriate SRHR interventions, informed by findings from these surveys.

Its objectives are to:

- Increase access to SRHR services which are often overburdened or not easily accessible in refugee settings;
- Reach the most marginalized, ensuring that none are left behind in accessing SRHR services; and
- Prioritize scale in reaching a robust population of refugees and in expanding the reach of evidence-informed SRHR interventions.



The challenge

While the need for action on SRHR among refugees is large, there is little rigorous evidence available to guide programming. Refugee populations have traditionally been excluded from robust, large-scale surveys due to reliability and validity concerns.

Often there is an assumption that rigorous evidence can't be collected in refugee settings. However, without an understanding of what refugees know, feel, and experience, we are unlikely to affect meaningful change.

Furthermore, in terms of evidence uptake, humanitarian actors are often dealing with multiple, multisectoral concerns, and SRHR is one of many often competing priorities. They are usually working in crises with funding constraints, often in low- and middle-income countries where national financing and aid are stretched thinly. Therefore, understanding how uptake happens when research and programme investments have been made is an important question to tackle.



Baobab principles for research uptake

Baobab was set up to influence policy and programming and to encourage the scale up of best and proven practices through pilot projects and the replication of successful approaches in new locations.

This approach was not a happy accident; it was informed by decades of previous engagement. It builds on long-standing relationships with the UNHCR Regional Bureau for the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region and UNHCR country operations in Ethiopia and Uganda. Further, all partners in the consortium have credibility and a trusted reputation for consistently producing robust evidence in the region.

This how to guide is organised around a set of principles and models that underpinned the Baobab approach. These are: (1) An embedded approach; (2) Stakeholder engagement; (3) Supporting rigorous, locally owned methods; (4) Capacity development and; (5) Adaptive communication.

By applying these principles and models researchers can maximise the likelihood that their research will be taken up by those with the power to make positive change. Of course, all contexts are different and will need bespoke approaches. However, some combination of these six principles and models should form a foundation of the approach.

This is how Baobab implemented the principles:

1. An embedded approach where collaboration with local partners was key

From UNHCR, to government departments for refugees, to FCDO and other donors, to refugees and community-based organisations (CBOs), the approach considered the positions and priorities of the parties who are key to change and build trust and ownership. Baobab were located in the countries where the research was conducted and able to draw on practical, cultural and political knowledge of how decisions are made and the needs of people within the humanitarian sector and national government. Baobab collaborated with Government Departments of Refugees, relevant Ministries and implementing organisations, other key bodies at the national level and local government structures to co-design approaches, tools, and interventions that simultaneously strengthened and provided support for government and other stakeholders to implement their own accountability frameworks. The approach was further embedded through the active participation of refugee and host communities in research and action to harness their expertise and knowledge.

2. Supporting rigorous, locally-owned methods

Baobab borrowed from established processes and mechanisms that are used at the national level. For example, for their work on violence against children, they adapted the Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (VACS), a survey designed to feed into the national response, to humanitarian settings for the first time ever. The national ownership of this well-regarded, global survey eased the way for the implementation and ownership of Humanitarian VACS (HVACS) in Uganda and Ethiopia.

3. Stakeholder engagement

Baobab built relationships and kept key actors informed and engaged in discussions around research development, intervention implementation and results. Service delivery organisations in SRHR (government bodies and implementing organisations) were at the forefront of interventions and research under the Baobab programme. Baobab tapped into existing Sub-Working Groups and community advisory groups in refugee settings. By mapping existing forums and networks of program implementers and policymakers, they were able to share findings and present their work strategically. They identified and supported champions for the work within government and non-governmental organisations who knew the strategic openings for uptake, had the influence to embed and scale-up Baobab's evidence and approaches into/through sustainable platforms, and could spread their new knowledge to the people who needed it.

4. Capacity development for innovation and learning

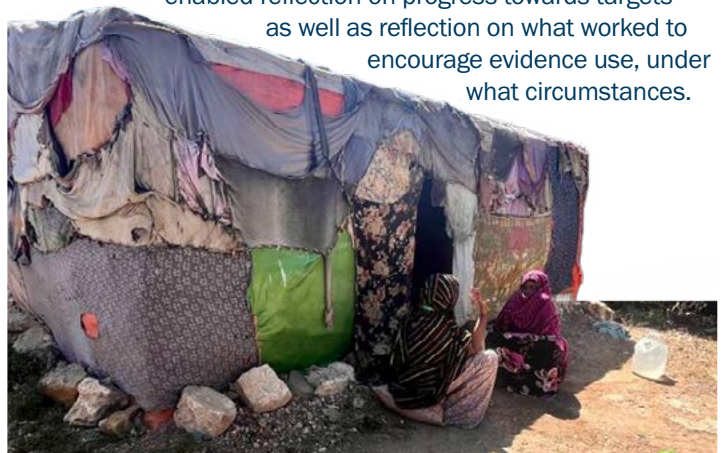
Providing initial technical and/or financial support to service delivery partners to implement new approaches in programming made uptake more likely, fostering rapid ownership. The approach included activities to strengthen the capacity of local and/or refugee-led organisations/initiatives, CBOs and refugee researchers and service providers to undertake research and communicate it effectively, and/or to implement interventions shaped by Baobab's evidence. Baobab supported and bridged the capacity of stakeholders, such as government refugee departments, Ministries, and implementing partners to be able to engage with the research and utilise it so that it contributes to policies, guidelines, and programmes. This provided Baobab with opportunities to co-create a process of research design, results interpretation and interrogation, and dissemination together with key stakeholders.

5. Adaptive and flexible communications

Baobab used a range of methods and outputs to communicate research findings in a process that began right from the start of the initiative. This included community radio, dialogues, dramas, musical compositions and skits at the community level along with more traditional meetings, networking and formal agreements with implementers and policymakers. These methods stimulated demand for evidence early on, while Baobab took steps to understand where further guidance was needed.

6. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Strong systems were created to monitor progress of interventions as they were carried out. Implementation science research methods were used to understand the feasibility, utility, and effectiveness of new ways of doing things. Tools such as the logframe for the project and regular case study collection enabled reflection on progress towards targets as well as reflection on what worked to encourage evidence use, under what circumstances.



Research uptake in the real world: From survey, to services, to scale up

While Baobab implemented a number of SRHR interventions, one of the most pioneering and successful research processes was related to the implementation of the HVACS in all 13 refugee settlements in Uganda. This was the first time that the VACS had been undertaken exclusively in a humanitarian context.

This survey demonstrated that rigorous research can be conducted in even the most challenging environments and generated data that was critical for understanding and addressing violence in refugee and displacement contexts.

The surveys found that violence against children happens often in refugee settings. They indicated that half (50%) of males and 43% of females aged 18 to 24 years experienced any type of violence (sexual, physical, or emotional) during their childhood years (i.e., prior to age 18), while among children currently aged 13 to 17 years, 65% of males and 49% of females reported ever experiencing any type of violence. Findings also revealed an intersection between violence and disability, with children and young people with disability being two or more times more likely to experience violence than their peers without a disability. Nonetheless, disclosure of sexual violence was notably low among children and adolescents, as was the likelihood to seek care/help for such violence. Convened by the Uganda Department of Refugees (Office of the Prime Minister), the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) and Baobab, humanitarian stakeholders pointed to the need to address sexual violence in particular, and to promote disclosure and help-seeking around it.

Traditionally, the identification of child survivors relied on reactive or passive methods – for example, waiting for children to exhibit visible signs of abuse and/or report the violence before intervention. HVACS findings demonstrated that this approach was insufficient, as it risked leaving countless children without the support they needed.

The survey data prompted a range of positive changes:

- It led to the creation of a new implementation research project. Baobab introduced proactive screening as part of research effort to test innovations that could improve outcomes for children. Over five months, in collaboration with the MGLSD, the Office of the Prime Minister's Department of Refugees, Windle Uganda International, and other government agencies in Uganda, Baobab worked with Para-Social Workers (PSWs) under the MGLSD's national PSW programme, drawn from both refugee and host communities. They built their capacity to proactively screen school-going children for experiences of sexual violence. As part of this school-based intervention, nearly 100 PSWs were trained in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, with a composition of 75% refugee PSWs and 25% host community PSWs. At the community and individual level, this five month intervention connected 653 children. In the twelve month period before only 16 had been identified. The intervention provided care to children and adolescents who would otherwise have fallen through the gaps.
- The research led to sustainable policy impacts, contributing to the refinement of national child protection practices. The proactive screening approach has been integrated into Uganda's National Training Manual for Para Social Workers, and into its first-ever National Para Social Workers Handbook.
- The research is being rolled out gradually. The Ministry secured external funding to support the piloting of the enhanced training curriculum and handbook in several new districts. There is a plan to take this to all districts when they have secured the appropriate budget.
- The implementation research was replicated in another country. Leveraging insights and lessons learned from the Uganda implementation, the Government of Ethiopia paid a learning visit to Uganda to learn lessons about the model, following its own HVACS, with very similar findings. They have adapted the model to the unique challenges of Ethiopia's refugee and displaced populations, with Baobab's technical support. The programme refined its training, logistical frameworks, and data collection processes to suit Ethiopia's distinct humanitarian cultural and social context.



Looking to the future

Baobab is demonstrating how rigorous evidence can catalyze real change. Drawing on the landmark HVACS conducted in Uganda and Ethiopia, we moved beyond data collection to cocreating practical solutions with governments, UNHCR, and civil society partners. In Uganda, we developed a schoolbased model for identifying and supporting children affected by sexual violence - an approach that places trained parasocial workers and places them directly within schools. This model enables early detection, immediate psychological first aid, swift referrals when needed, and continuous followup for survivors, all while reinforcing existing protection systems.

Uganda's MGLSD played a central role in shaping this model, by building on its established National ParaSocial Worker Programme and integrating the new approach into national training curricula and operational guidance. By so doing, the Ministry has taken a significant step toward longterm, systemwide reform. With this approach now institutionalised nationally (through national training and guidance documents), Baobab is helping ensure that the lessons and innovations emerging from frontline practice reach broader policy arenas.

Baobab is contributing to elevating Africandriven solutions in global discussions. Baobab has partnered with the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) to amplify Africa's voice globally, shaping commitments from the first-ever Global Ministerial Conference to End Violence Against Children held in Bogota, to ARISE Africa: Accelerating Action to End Violence Against Children.

Further reading

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

Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Republic of Uganda. (2025). [National Training Manual for Para-Social Workers](#). Kampala: Government of Uganda.

Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Republic of Uganda. (2025). [National Para-Social Workers Handbook](#). Kampala: Government of Uganda.

Nur, A., Seruwagi, G., Odwe, G., Kisaakye, P. et al. (2025). [Screening for Sexual Violence Against Children in Humanitarian Settings: A Feasibility Study of a Para-Social Worker-Led Intervention in Uganda](#). Journal of International Humanitarian Action 10(19).

Together for Girls (n.d.). About the Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys. togetherforgirls.org/en/about-the-vacs.



This case example illustrates how locally grounded, evidenceinformed interventions can be co-created, adapted and scaled, turning humanitarian challenges into opportunities for stronger protection systems, greater accountability, and enhanced African leadership in global child protection. In addition to Uganda, the model has since been piloted in both Ethiopia and Tanzania, with wider interest expressed from other African nations at several convenings hosted by ACPF.



Undie, C., Muthuri, S., Odwe, G. Kisaakye, P. et al. (2023). [Linking Research to Action for Children in Humanitarian Contexts: Synopsis of the 2022 Uganda Humanitarian Violence Against Children and Youth Survey \(HVACS\) Findings and Data-to-Action Workshop](#). Nairobi: Population Council, Inc., Population Council Kenya, and African Population and Health Research Center.



African Population and Health Research Center



popcouncil.org/project/baobab-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-in-refugee-settings