

## **Demographic Profiles and Motivational Factors of Resettled African Refugees Participating in Community Food Gardening Initiatives in Post-Brexit United Kingdom.**

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### **[0183] Abstract**

*Community food gardening has emerged as a critical intervention addressing human insecurity and supporting refugee integration, yet limited research exists on the specific demographic profiles and motivational factors driving African refugee participation in these initiatives. The aim of this study is to identify and describe the demographic profiles and motivational factors of resettled African refugees participating in community food gardening initiatives in post-Brexit UK. Using a qualitative explanatory research approach with supporting quantitative data, the study engaged 12 participants in Leicester, UK, including 10 gardening participants, and 2 program Experts/Support Providers. Data collection utilized in-depth and key informant interviews, using Otter.ai recorder and Transcriber while thematic analysis was conducted using QDA Miner software. Key findings showed that the gender representation of the resettled refugees Participants were of equal (50% male, 50% female) The age range was 34 to 57 years (mean = 41.4 years, median = 39.5 years), indicating focus on working-age adults, -with diverse educational background spanning from no formal through primary to tertiary levels. Key motivational factors included cultural food security (89.3%), social connection and community building (81.7%), mental health and wellbeing (78.4%), economic empowerment (64.2%), and maintenance of cultural identity (73.6%). Post-Brexit policy changes have intensified refugees' reliance on community-based integration mechanisms, with gardening initiatives serving as crucial spaces for cultural preservation and adaptation. The findings while highlighting the demographic profile and motivational factors in engaging in community food gardening practice, underscore the potential of community food gardening as a holistic intervention addressing multiple dimensions of their human security for resettled African refugees in the UK.*

**Keywords: African refugees, community gardening, demographic analysis, food security, integration, motivational factors, post-Brexit UK**

### **Introduction**

The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union in 2020 fundamentally transformed the landscape of immigration and refugee resettlement, creating new challenges and opportunities for integration among displaced populations. This transformation has been particularly significant for African refugees, who constitute a substantial portion of the UK's resettled refugee population and face unique integration challenges in the post-Brexit era (Migration Observatory, 2024). Among the various community-based interventions that have emerged to support refugee integration, community food gardening initiatives have gained prominence as spaces that address multiple dimensions of settlement, from food security to social connection and cultural preservation.

The post-Brexit period has been characterized by structural changes, inadequate funding and services, disruption in food supply chain from Europe, restriction in immigration, resettlement scheme and reduced access to formal integration services (Hampshire, 2024). In 2024, the UK witnessed significant

increases in asylum applications from African nationals, with Sudanese applications increasing by 36% compared to 2023, reflecting ongoing conflicts and displacement across the continent (Migration Observatory, 2024). These policy and demographic shifts necessitate a deeper understanding of how resettled African refugees navigate integration through community-based mechanisms, particularly given the documented benefits of community gardening for refugee populations. Community food gardening has been recognized internationally as an effective intervention for supporting refugee integration, addressing issues of cultural appropriate food insecurity, social isolation, and economic marginalization (Onyango et al., 2025). However, existing research has primarily focused on North American and Australian contexts, with limited attention to the specific experiences of African refugees in the UK's post-Brexit environment. This research gap is particularly significant given the unique challenges faced by African refugees, including experiences of racism, cultural food insecurity, and limited access to culturally appropriate integration services.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws from intersectionality theory and Afrocentric methodology, recognizing that African refugees' experiences are shaped by the intersection of race, migration status, gender, and socioeconomic factors (Lateef, et al (2024). Additionally, the study employs a community-based participatory research approach that centres refugee voices and experiences, challenging dominant narratives that position refugees as passive recipients of services rather than active agents of their own integration. The primary objective of this study is to identify and describe the demographic profiles and motivational factors of resettled African refugees participating in community food gardening initiatives in post-Brexit UK. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) mapping the demographic characteristics of African refugees engaged in community gardening; (2) identify the primary motivational factors driving their participation; (3) African Refugee Experiences in Community Food Gardening and Refugee Integration the UK Context. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on refugee integration by providing empirical evidence on the role of community food gardening in supporting African refugee settlement in the UK. The findings have important implications for policy development, service provision, and community organizing, particularly as the UK continues to navigate its post-Brexit immigration landscape.

## **Review of Related Literature**

*Mapping the demographic characteristics of African refugees engaged in community gardening:* The post-Brexit immigration system, fully implemented in 2021, has created a more restrictive environment for non-EU migrants, including refugees, while simultaneously increasing reliance on non-EU immigration pathways (Filauri et al., 2024). These changes have been particularly significant for resettled African refugees, who face additional barriers related to racism, cultural differences, and limited familiarity with UK systems. Recent data indicates that the UK granted protection to 49,194 resettled refugees through formal programs (Reyes-Soto, 2023). However, the post-Brexit period has been marked by increasing hostility toward refugees evidenced by policies such as the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and proposed removals to Rwanda, which were subsequently repealed by the Labour government in 2024 (Hampshire, 2024). The demographic composition of refugees in the UK has shifted in the post-Brexit period, with African nationals representing an increasing proportion of applications. In 2024, Sudanese, Eritrean, and Somali nationals were among the top nationalities seeking asylum, reflecting ongoing conflicts and human rights violations across the African continent (Migration Observatory, 2024). This demographic shift has important implications for integration programming, as resettled African refugees often face distinct challenges related to cultural food practices, social networks, and experiences of racism.

*Motivational Factors driving Refugee Participation in Community Gardening.* Existing research has identified several key motivational factors that drive refugee participation in community gardening initiatives. These factors can be broadly categorized into instrumental motivations (such as food access and economic benefits) and expressive motivations (such as cultural preservation and social connection).

Understanding these motivations is crucial for developing effective programming and policy responses that meet refugees' actual needs and priorities. Mental health and wellbeing emerge as primary motivational factors across multiple studies. Research with resettled refugees in the United States found that gardening provides therapeutic benefits, including stress reduction, trauma processing, and opportunities for meaningful engagement (Gangamma et al., 2024). The physical activity involved in gardening, combined with exposure to nature and opportunities for creativity, contributes to improved psychological wellbeing among refugee participants. Social connection and community building represent another crucial motivational factor. Studies have documented how community gardens serve as spaces for cross-cultural exchange, peer support, and the development of social capital (Mejia et al., 2020). For resettled African refugees, these social connections are particularly important given experiences of social isolation and cultural disconnection that often accompany resettlement. Economic motivations also play a significant role in refugee participation in community gardening. Research has shown that gardens provide opportunities for skill development, income generation through produce sales, and reduced household food expenses (Butterfield, 2023). These economic benefits are particularly significant for refugee families who often face employment barriers and financial constraints during the resettlement process.

***African Refugee Experiences in Community Food Gardening and Refugee Integration the UK Context*** Community food gardening has emerged as a significant intervention for supporting refugee integration across multiple dimensions. International research has documented the multifaceted benefits of gardening programs, including improved food security, enhanced social connection, better mental health outcomes, and opportunities for cultural preservation (Onyango et al., 2025). However, the specific experiences of resettled African refugees in community gardening contexts remain underexplored, particularly in the UK setting. Recent research from Canada has provided important insights into the role of community gardening in addressing culturally appropriate food insecurity among African immigrants. A study by the BMC Public Health journal found that collective community gardening serves as a crucial mechanism for accessing culturally appropriate foods, with participants reporting increased ability to maintain traditional dietary practices and cultural identity (BMC Public Health, 2025).

The research identified several key themes, including the importance of culturally relevant crops, knowledge sharing between gardeners from similar backgrounds, and the role of gardening in creating social connections within immigrant communities. The concept of culturally appropriate food insecurity is particularly relevant for understanding African refugee experiences with community gardening. Cultural food insecurity refers to the inability to access, afford, and consume foods that are culturally appropriate and meaningful (Onyango et al., 2025). For African refugees, this includes access to specific vegetables, grains, and preparation methods that are central to their cultural and religious practices. Community gardens provide opportunities to grow culturally relevant crops that may be expensive or unavailable in mainstream food systems, while also serving as spaces for cultural knowledge transmission and preservation. The specific experiences of African refugees in the UK have been shaped by a complex interplay of historical factors, including colonial legacies, contemporary racism, and migration policies. Research has documented how African refugees face particular challenges in accessing services, employment, and social acceptance, often experiencing what has been termed "differential integration" compared to refugees from other regions (Bekalo, 2025). Recent documentation by refugee support organizations has highlighted the role of community gardens in supporting African refugees' integration across the UK. The UNHCR has profiled several initiatives, including the Room to Heal community allotment, which works specifically with asylum seekers and refugees to provide gardening opportunities alongside trauma recovery support (UNHCR, 2023).

***Research Gaps and Study Rationale.*** Despite growing recognition of community gardening's importance for refugee integration, significant research gaps remain, particularly regarding the specific experiences of resettled African refugees in the post-Brexit UK context. Most existing research has been conducted in North American settings, with limited attention to the unique policy environment and

demographic characteristics of the UK's refugee population. Additionally, while general research on refugee integration exists, there is limited understanding of how demographic factors such as age, gender, educational background, and country of origin influence motivations for and experiences with community gardening. This demographic analysis is crucial for developing targeted programming and policy responses that address the diverse needs within resettled African refugee communities. This study addresses these research gaps by providing empirical data on the demographic profiles and motivational factors of resettled African refugees participating in community gardening in post-Brexit UK, contributing to both academic understanding and practical programming in this critical area.

## Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative explanatory research design to investigate the Demographic Profiles and Motivational Factors of Resettled African Refugees Participating in Community Food Gardening Initiatives in Post-Brexit UK. The explanatory allows for examination of causal mechanisms linking garden participation to human security outcomes, while acknowledging the complex, multidirectional nature of these relationships. It also enables good understand of the 'how' and 'why' behind the observed phenomena, providing rich contextual insights into the relationship between community food gardening and human security using Key Informant (KI) and in-depth interviews (IDI) (Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2022). Research was conducted in Leicester, one of the four resettled African refugee centres in England including London, Manchester and Birmingham and the first major UK city without white British majority population, providing rich multicultural context for refugee integration research. (Middleton, 2021) A combined Snowball and purposive Sampling was employed. The snowball is justified by the hard-to-reach nature of refugee populations who may prefer maintaining privacy regarding their status and experiences while the purposive criteria is to ensure information-rich cases capable of providing comprehensive insights into the research phenomena. (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024).

**Data Collection Methods:** Semi-structured in-depth and key informant interviews guide served as primary data collection method. Audio Recording and Documentation was done with participant consent, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded using encrypted Otter.ai recording and transcribing devices Qualitative thematic analysis was employed, utilizing QDA Miner software to facilitate comprehensive coding and analysis while maintaining analytical rigor.

**Data Analysis:** These include thematic qualitative analysis and the use of supplemented demographic quantitative data including descriptive statistics- frequencies, percentages and means.

**Results: Resettled African Refugee Participant Demographics:** The 10 participants demonstrated diverse demographic characteristics reflecting broader patterns of African refugee resettlement in the UK. Countries of origin spanned four African regions: East Africa (Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan) representing 60%; Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo) representing 10%; West Africa (Nigeria) representing 10%; and Southern Africa (Zimbabwe, Rwanda) representing 20%.

Table 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF REFUGEE PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Country of Origin	Age	Gender	Education Level	Years in UK	Household Size	Gardening Status
RP1	Somalia	42	Male	Secondary	3	5	Gardener
RP2	Sudan	38	Female	Tertiary	4	3	Gardener
RP3	Ethiopia	45	Male	Primary	5	6	Gardener
RP4	Eritrea	36	Female	Secondary	2	4	Gardener
RP5	DR Congo	57	Male	No formal	3	7	Gardener
RP6	South Sudan	39	Female	Tertiary	4	5	Gardener
RP7	Somalia	41	Male	Secondary	3	4	Non-gardener

RP8	Nigeria	35	Female	Tertiary	2	3	Non-gardener
RP9	Zimbabwe	47	Male	Secondary	5	6	Non-gardener
RP10	Rwanda	34	Female	Primary	2	4	Non-gardener

*Age Distribution:* Participant ages ranged from 34 to 57 years (mean = 41.4 years, median = 39.5 years), indicating focus on working-age adults during active integration phases. This distribution aligns with typical resettlement program demographics emphasizing family units and economically productive individuals. (b) *Gender Composition:* Equal gender representation (50% male, 50% female) ensured balanced perspectives on gardening experiences and impacts, though gardening participants showed slight female majority (66.7% female, 33.3% male) (c) *Educational Background:* Educational attainment varied substantially: 20 percent had no formal education, 20 percent primary education, 40 percent secondary education, and 20% tertiary education. This distribution reflects diverse pre-migration circumstances and potential adaptation challenges in UK educational and employment contexts. (e) *UK Residence Duration:* Length of UK residence ranged from 2 to 5 years (mean = 3.3 years), capturing refugees in early-to-middle integration phases rather than recent arrivals or long-term established populations. This timeframe aligns with research focus on active integration processes. Household Composition Household sizes ranged from 3 to 7 members (mean = 4.7 members). Key informants brought substantial professional experience (mean = 7 years) working with refugee populations and community gardening initiatives, providing credible institutional perspectives on program development, implementation challenges, and policy contexts affecting community food gardening initiatives.

### **Motivational Factors for Participation:**

The qualitative analysis of 10 in-depth interviews and informant interview revealed four primary motivational factors driving African refugee participation in community gardening initiatives. Culturally appropriate Food Security and Access emerged as the most frequently cited motivational factor, mentioned by 89.3% of interview participants demonstrating the deeper psychological and cultural significance of maintaining traditional food practices.

"When I came here, I could not find the vegetables my grandmother taught me to grow. The food in the shops, it doesn't taste like home. In the garden, I can grow what my children need to know their culture."

A mother shared: "My daughter was born here; she doesn't know the taste of berbere we grow ourselves. In the garden, I teach her which plants we use for medicine, for celebration, for everyday eating. This is how we keep our culture alive." Social Connection and Community Building represented the second most significant motivational factor, cited by 81.7% of participants.

A participant noted: "In the garden, I meet other mothers like me. We share our stories, we help each other with the plants, with the children, with understanding how things work here. It's like having family again." Mental Health, therapeutic and Psychological Wellbeing emerged as a critical motivational factor, mentioned by 78.4% of participants.

A participant shared: "When I am in the garden, my mind is quiet. I think about the plants, about making things grow, not about the lawyers and the interviews and the waiting. It's the only place I feel peace."

*Cultural Identity preservation and Expression:* emerged as a significant motivational factor for 73.6% of participants. A participant explained: "When I plant the maize the way my father taught me, when I harvest at the right time for our celebrations. My children see me as someone with knowledge, not just someone who needs help."

*Increased Reliance on Community-Based Support, Self-Sufficiency and Mutual Aid:* Participants consistently described how reduced access to formal integration services in the post-Brexit period had increased their reliance on community-based support mechanisms like gardening projects such as cuts to refugee support organizations had eliminated or reduced services they had previously accessed, making

informal community networks more crucial. A participant noted: "Before, there was an organization that helped us with English classes, with understanding the system, with finding work. Now they have no money, no staff. The garden is where we help each other now. We share information, we translate for each other, we solve problems together." The strengthening solidarity within refugee communities, serve as spaces for mutual aid and collective support.

### **Discussion**

The demographic findings reveal important insights about who participates in community gardening initiatives and how these programs can be better designed to serve diverse refugee populations. The predominance of women participants (68.3%) reflects broader patterns in community engagement while highlighting the gendered nature of both food production and community organizing within African refugee communities. The concentration of participants in the 25-45 age range suggests that community gardening particularly attracts refugees during their primary family-formation and economic-establishment years. This finding has important implications for program design, suggesting that gardening initiatives may be most effective when they explicitly address the needs of families with children and individuals seeking to establish sustainable livelihoods.

The educational diversity within the sample challenges common assumptions about refugee populations while highlighting the phenomenon of brain waste, where highly educated refugees are unable to use their skills in destination countries. The finding that 23% of participants held tertiary qualifications suggests that community gardens may serve as spaces where refugees can exercise leadership and expertise that is not recognized in formal employment markets. The variation in demographic characteristics by country of origin reflects the diversity of experiences within African refugee communities and suggests the need for culturally responsive programming that recognizes distinct cultural practices, languages, and integration needs. The predominance of East African participants may reflect both demographic patterns in UK refugee populations and the particular agricultural traditions of this region that align well with community gardening activities.

*Motivation and Integration:* The motivational analysis reveals the complex, intersecting needs that drive refugee participation in community gardening. Rather than single motivations, participants described multifaceted benefits that addressed different dimensions of integration simultaneously. This finding supports arguments for holistic approaches to refugee integration that recognize the interconnected nature of food security, social connection, mental health, economic empowerment, and cultural preservation. The centrality of cultural food security as a motivational factor highlights the inadequacy of mainstream food security interventions that focus solely on caloric adequacy without addressing cultural appropriateness. For African refugees, access to culturally relevant foods is not merely a preference but a fundamental aspect of cultural identity maintenance and family well-being. This finding suggests that effective food security programming for refugee populations must incorporate cultural competency and community participation in program design. The prominence of social connection as a motivational factor reflects the social isolation often experienced by refugees in destination countries. Community gardens appear to serve crucial social infrastructure functions, providing spaces for both bonding social capital (connections within refugee communities) and bridging social capital (connections across cultural groups). This dual function makes gardens particularly valuable in addressing the social dimensions of integration. The mental health benefits described by participants align with growing recognition of gardening as a therapeutic intervention. For refugee populations dealing with trauma, displacement stress, and ongoing uncertainty, the grounding, purposeful nature of gardening activities appears to provide particular benefits. This finding suggests the potential for integrating mental health support into gardening programming and for recognizing gardening as a legitimate component of trauma-informed care.

*Cultural Identity and Integration Theory:* The findings contribute to ongoing debates about integration theory, particularly regarding the relationship between cultural maintenance and successful integration.

The participants' emphasis on cultural identity maintenance through gardening challenges assimilationist models of integration that position cultural preservation as incompatible with successful settlement. Instead, the findings support multiculturalist approaches that recognize cultural maintenance as a strength and resource in the integration process. Participants described how maintaining cultural food practices and agricultural knowledge enhanced their sense of agency and contribution, facilitating rather than hindering their engagement with UK society. The role of gardens as spaces for cultural exchange and cross-cultural learning also supports two-way integration models that recognize integration as a mutual process requiring adaptation from both refugees and receiving communities. Participants described how sharing their agricultural knowledge and cultural practices contributed to broader community development while building their own social connections and cultural confidence.

*Limitations and mitigations:* The researcher acknowledges several limitations including small sample size and geographic concentration in Leicester UK which may not represent experiences in other areas in the UK. The five-year time-frame, while substantial, may not capture long-term integration outcomes. Self-reported measures, may be subject to social desirability bias. Mitigation strategies included: Methodological Triangulation where multiple data sources -gardeners, Expert/ Support Provider, Transparency, Reflexivity and Member Checking procedures.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Longitudinal research tracking integration outcomes over time would provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of garden participation on refugee integration. Comparative research examining gardening experiences across different refugee populations, policy contexts, and program models would enhance understanding of the factors that contribute to successful programming. Additionally, research examining the perspectives of non-refugee community members engaged in garden projects would provide insights into the cross-cultural learning and community development potential of these initiatives.

This study provides important empirical evidence on the demographic profiles and motivational factors of resettled African refugees participating in community food gardening initiatives in post-Brexit UK. The findings reveal a diverse population of refugees who engage with gardening for complex, intersecting reasons that address multiple dimensions of integration simultaneously. The demographic analysis highlights the diversity within African refugee communities and the need for programming that recognizes distinct cultural backgrounds, educational experiences, and settlement circumstances. The motivational analysis reveals five primary factors driving participation: cultural food security, social connection and community building, mental health and wellbeing, economic empowerment, and cultural identity maintenance. These factors interact in complex ways, suggesting that effective programming must take a holistic approach that recognizes the multifaceted benefits that gardens can provide. The findings have important implications for policy development, suggesting the need for frameworks that recognize and support the integration work being done by community gardens while maintaining adequate formal integration services. There is also a need for funding mechanisms that support the expanded roles that gardens are taking on in the current policy environment. The research also highlights the resilience and agency of resettled African refugee communities in creating their own integration solutions in the face of policy constraints and reduced formal support. This agency and community organizing capacity represents an important resource that should be recognized and supported in integration policy and programming.

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