

EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES: TALES FROM UGANDA AND BEYOND

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 Analysis

Gevigette Chamba a journalist with radio Sauti ya Injiliin Goma, DRC, knows all the pain of being a journalist. She fled the Masisi village, Southern Kivu in DRC, after armed combatants gang raped her and setting her house ablaze. She was forced to flee her country to the neighboring Uganda with her 14 year-old daughter. Prior to the incident, despite the insecurity, her daughter used to go to school, in the hope of a better future. But now as a refugee, she no longer goes to school because her mother does not have the money to send her to one.

Refugees in settlements are ideally provided with services such as healthcare and education. However, education remains a fairytale for many refugees. Uganda hosts over 1.36 million refugees, making it the third largest refugee-hosting country in the world after Turkey and Pakistan. South Sudanese make up the largest refugee population in Uganda (985,512 people)

followed by the DRC (271,967) and Burundi (36,677) while the rest of 70,988 refugees come from Ethiopia, Eritrea or Rwanda.

According to the UN Convention and Protocol as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, refugees are entitled to the same rights as the nationals in the hosting nation, this means the rights of education for the refugees must be guaranteed. Yet the reality is sadly far from it.

According to a recent report titled *Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis* by UNHCR, of the 7.1 million school-age refugee children, more than half (3.7 million) of them do not go to school. According to the report, the barriers to education become even harder as the children grow older. Whereas 63 percent of refugee children go to primary school compared to 91 percent globally, only 24 percent of adolescents get a secondary education compared to 84 percent globally.

Global movements for expanded access to education like Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) focus more on primary education. As a result, donors and other agencies invested minimally in secondary and tertiary education. The argument often given is that secondary and tertiary education benefits smaller numbers. But as more children drop out at primary level, their chances of progressing in life reduce substantially. This has an adverse effect on the future stability of their regions and affects the success of global initiatives that require a well-educated and conscious humanity. By not according refugee children the opportunity to gain formal education, the world is missing on a lot of benefits that would stem from an educated mass including the possibility of social mobility and even mitigation of global challenges like climate change that require a global educated mass.

Education funding is important for the displaced to provide them with the knowledge and skills to help them rebuild their lives and provide a path for a prosperous future. To effectively achieve this goal, secondary and tertiary education is paramount. Chiribangula Nsimire Pierrine, a refugee from Goma, DRC who fled to Uganda with her five children knows well enough the difficulty that refugee children are facing. Now an administrator at the Hope School, she narrated that although the number of refugees is huge, the Hope school is the only privately-owned refugee school in the vast region and cannot possibly accommodate all refugee children in the area. It is clear that more help is required. These children have to contend with trauma, loss of loved ones and fear. School offers a chance to ameliorate some of the conditions that most of the children go through. Now, not only that these children do not get educated, other important services like counseling and guidance are rarely accorded. As a result, the children,

on top of lacking skills and knowledge are also psychologically affected which contributes to the cycle of violence when they grow up. Atuwa Mihali 14, says he fled from Rutchuru, DRC after his parents were murdered in cold blood. *“I ran from home with my brother Adilli Mobutu but along the way my brother got lost in the forest, I don’t know whether he is still alive. I don’t want to go back home because they may kill me. The person who killed my father is still there, he is occupying the land, he may think I have come to reclaim the land and kill me as well”*. He says that his main challenge is raising school fees, which he gets through selling water from the well. An account of **Baunda Deborah, a 13 year-old refugee** studying at the Hope primary school is similarly distressing. *“I came from Bukavu, DRC, our fellow children abuse us saying that we are refugees and should go back to our country because we are increasing the population. I don’t want to go back to Congo, they will kill me, they wanted to kill my father Mr. Baunda Maelezo. He was a Doctor in Buniakili, Congo, he is now a tailor in Ndeeba, a Kampala suburb. He cannot afford to raise my school fees on time.*

The Ugandan Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, Hilary Onek explained that just as Ugandans are not fully served in the field of education among others, the same happens to the refugees. He adds that there are primary schools for refugees in the camps and if resources allow, secondary and technical schools will be established there. But until then, the future of thousands and the whole region may be bleak until a solution is found. Increasing the focus to secondary and tertiary education with the help of donors and other agencies is one of the crucial stepping-stones for a brighter future of so many children in dire need.

Hamza Kyeyune contributed to this report from Kampala, Uganda.