



THE REFUGEE CRISIS:

A CHALLENGE FOR UGANDA AND THE WORLD

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By the end of 2016, the number of displaced people around the world had risen to 65.6 million, an increase of 300,000 on the year before, and the largest number ever recorded, according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR. To put this large number in perspective, one should note that it is more than the population of the United Kingdom or almost twice the population of Uganda.

Of the 65.6 million, 40.3 million were people displaced within their own country (internally displaced persons), according to the UNHCR's and the 2016 Global Trends report. Refugees who fled to another country made up the next biggest group, at 22.5 million people, the highest number ever recorded. The rest, at 2.8 million people, were asylum seekers, refugees who had fled their own countries and were seeking protection elsewhere.



The Arab Syria Republic generated the highest number of refugees, with 5.5 million Syrian having fled the country because of the civil war. However, over the course of 2016, South Sudan became a major new source of refugees after the breakdown of peace in the country. By 2018, the civil war in Syria, in its eighth year and with no sign that it would end soon, had both internally and externally displaced people numbering a whopping 12 million.

Worryingly, the number of people being displaced continues to grow. Of the total refugee count in 2016, 10.3 million became refugees that year. Currently, Uganda is the biggest refugee host country in Africa. As at January 2018, the country had become host to 1,411,794 refugees.

Reasons why people become refugees

The most common reason why people become refugees is wars and conflicts. The largest group of refugees in the world are fleeing civil conflict in Syria, South Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

People also flee from persecution, which takes religious, social, racial or political forms. Religious refugees, for example, include Muslims persecuted in Myanmar, Christians in the Central African Republic (CAF) and Hindus in Pakistan.

In Uganda, displacement of people, other than that caused by the two-decade LRA war in northern Uganda which ended in the mid-2000s, has largely been due to natural hazards like landslides and consequences like hunger, which can also be attributed to climate change. Though officially climate change is not yet a valid reason for an asylum claim, it is increasingly becoming a cause of displacement of people. It is estimated that in the next 83 years, a stunning 13 million coastal dwellers could be displaced because of climate change.

In Uganda, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 61 disasters brought on by natural hazards were reported between 1980 and 2010 and almost 5 million people were affected by incidences including floods, earthquakes, landslides, drought, epidemics and livestock diseases.

Challenges of hosting refugees

Hosting of refugees comes with challenges such as environmental degradation during the process of setting up camps and/or settlements where trees are felled and ecosystems disrupted. There are also risks of insecurity spill-overs from the conflict in the country of origin. The government of Rwanda, for example, has always feared that the conflict in the DRC might spill over into Rwanda, which partly explains the restrictions on access to Rwanda for refugees from the DRC.

Refugees put pressure on public social services such as education, water and health, which often cause conflicts with host communities. Recently, conflicts developed between refugees in Kyangwali Refugee Settlement in Hoima district (Western Uganda) and the host communities over water point sources.

There are huge economic challenges in hosting refugees. A UN study in Jordan, one of the biggest refugee host countries in the Middle East, estimated the cost of hosting Syrian refugees in 2013 and 2014 at USD 5.3 billion. The Jordanian government and the UN had estimated that the cost of hosting refugees in 2014 would amount to only USD 2.1 billion.

In 2017, Uganda and UNHCR hosted the Uganda Solidarity Summit on Refugees, hoping to raise USD 2 billion for humanitarian assistance for the over 1.4 million refugees in the country. The majority of the refugees from South Sudan and the DRC, two of Africa's biggest refugee source countries, are hosted in Uganda. By December

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George Katongole.



2017, Uganda was host to 986,626 and 236,406 South Sudanese and DRC refugees respectively. This definitely puts a strain on the national economy.

“Do we really have the potential to host refugees?” poses journalist George Katongole. “I would not mind the resources that Uganda spends on refugees in refugee settlements,” argues Katongole, “but we also have people in this country who are in worse situations than those refugees. There are people – even in Kampala – who cannot afford to feed themselves.”

The influx of refugees often impacts on the politics and governance of host countries. In 2017, in Holland, after the elections that produced no decisive winner, splits over refugee policy among political parties that needed to form a coalition government left the country with no government for three months. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s open-door policy towards refugees in Germany was highly criticised by her political opponents. This was a risk to her party, the Christian Democratic Union, which almost lost the 2017

elections.

The issue of refugees has also been one of contention within the European Union (EU), with some member countries divided over the matter. Countries like Hungary, for example, refused to take in their quarter share of refugees entering Europe, arguing that it would strain her economy. The number of people seeking asylum in Europe reached a record high of 1.3 million in 2016. Most of the refugees came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The EU was forced to sign a refugee pact with Turkey. In the highly criticised deal, Turkey agreed to take back migrants who entered Greece, and send legal refugees to the EU. In exchange, the EU agreed to give Turkey 6 billion euros, and to allow visa-free travel for Turkish citizens by the end of June 2016.

“At the onset of a massive refugee crisis, a refugee influx into a country can cause a significant overload on a country’s resources, social services and infrastructure,” notes David Kigozi, programme manager, Sudan, at the International Refugee Rights Initiative. Kigozi however says this happens if the refugee management system is totally based on “care-and-maintenance” programmes which pay no attention to the empowerment of refugees to take responsibility for their own livelihoods,

at least partially, if they wish to do so. “In protracted situations, however,” Kigozi argues, “where the planned response focuses on the development of both refugees and hosts in an environment that is supportive of refugee rights, it would be far-fetched to consider refugees as a burden.”

There is evidence of the positive impact that refugees make. They supply needed skills, as the case is in Germany, or create employment, as the case is in Kampala, with some Somali refugees operating restaurants and fuel petrol stations, among others. The refugee crisis, therefore, is perhaps a challenge that has no explicit conclusion but one that ought to be handled on a case-by-case basis basing on when it occurs.

Top 10 source countries of refugees

1. Syria
2. Afghanistan
3. South Sudan
4. Somalia
5. Sudan
6. DRC
7. CAF
8. Myanmar
9. Eritrea
10. Burundi