

Education for All? Uganda's Plan for Africa's Refugee Crisis

Uganda – a Pioneer Nation in Refugee Management

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For years now, the landlocked country has been among those countries hosting the highest number of refugees and offering a safe haven in the midst of trouble spots such as the Democratic Republic Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. Currently, an estimated 1.3 million refugees reside in Uganda. Since 61% of refugees are minors, the humanitarian crisis affects specifically the young generation. Such circumstances put additional pressure on Uganda's constrained education system. Uganda has begun to address these issues by focusing its refugee management policies on education and herein developed an internationally-praised action plan. What is the state of refugee education in the developing country Uganda, whose own citizens are already troubled by shortcomings in the education system?

More than 1.2 million refugees

The East African country Uganda has continuously been labelled as politically stable and has become a place of refuge for those who flee the war-torn realities of the neighbouring countries. As of May 2019, roughly 1.2 million refugees have been recorded in Uganda by UNHCR. Estimates, however, claim the figures add up to 1.4 million since biometric registration is lagging behind.

Refugees from all neighbouring nations

More than 800.000 of recorded refugees originate from the world's youngest country South Sudan, which has been stuck in brutal civil war since independence in 2011. Various peace agreements have promoted hope for return to normalcy so that the South Sudanese government has called on refugees to return to their homes. Nevertheless, fighting continues in some parts of the country and thus refugees are repelled from journeying back home. A participant of an intercultural dialogue at the Rhino Refugee Settlement in North-Western Uganda elaborates that a peace agreement does not necessarily imply a ceasefire. She reports on the war which continues in her village and refers to a possible return to South Sudan as a death-trap.

The second largest group of refugees enter Uganda through its border with the Eastern part of the DRC. In spite of, but also because of its richness in natural resources, the Congolese region has been war-torn for decades, thus causing the population to suffer from armed conflict between numerous rebel groups, gangs and militia. Continuous outbreaks of the Ebola virus have further contributed to a rising number of casualties. For the time period of March and April alone, the World Health Organization recorded 170 new cases of Ebola.

An approximate 36,000 refugees further stem from Burundi, which has been marred by conflict over the past decades. In the tiny country bordering Rwanda, Tanzania and the DRC, the third term of President Pierre Nkurunziza and his Government's brutal violations of human rights have expelled more than 300,000 Burundians. Some of these, have taken to the road to Uganda.

Settlements distributed all throughout the country

In Uganda, the majority of the 1.2 million forced migrants resides in settlements created by the Government. Currently, 15 of such settlements exist – most of them are located along the border to South Sudan and the DRC, in the Ugandan region *West Nile*, where refugees constitute almost a third of the population. *West Nile* is also home to the settlement *Bidibidi*, which hosts around 224,000 displaced persons, thus making it the largest refugee settlement in Africa and the second largest in the world.

Since the refugee hosting districts are among the least developed districts in Uganda, rising numbers of refugees constitute a true challenge to the poorly equipped education and health systems in the districts. According to Ugandan Law, refugees have the same rights to access public services like their Ugandan counterparts. In the education system, the strains of this prevailing legal situation become quite visible: Overcrowded class rooms, lack of trained staff and unavailability of scholastic material emerge as pressuring challenges.

Progressive refugee management in Uganda

Uganda has taken on a pioneer role in progressive, integration-oriented refugee management. The country signed all international agreements relating to the rights of displaced persons and has additionally enforced and strengthened these rights through national laws, such as the *Refugees Act 2006* and the *Refugee Relations 2010*. Refugees have the right to work, to move freely, to choose their place of residence and to access the same public services like Ugandan citizens. In this, Uganda's refugee policy aims at self-reliance, thus giving freedoms and independence to all new-comers. After their arrival, force migrants are thus offered a piece of land, in large governmental settlements, to be used for agricultural cultivation.

Despite high appraisal of Uganda's refugee policy, its image suffered substantial damage in 2018. Studies of the United Nations proved that refugee numbers had been fraudulently altered and that funds had been corrupted. The Government had created 300,000 non-existing refugees and side-tracked development aid. As a result, international donors, the European Union amongst others, threatened to halt financial flows so that the Ugandan Government had to bow down to international pressure. At the peak of the scandal, high ranking Government workers lost their positions. The cooperation with UNHCR in form of biometric identity registration subsequently de-escalated the situation.

Albeit these irregularities, Uganda remains most frequented refugee-hosting country on the African continent. As the small nation cannot manage these refugees flows without international aid, the UNHCR deputy commissioner Kelly Clements pleaded for solidarity towards Uganda's refugee management policies.

Schools for Protection

Throughout the last years, the Ugandan *Ministry for Education* has developed different strategies to respond to the refugee crisis, while at the same time incorporating the local population. One of its strategies is the so-called *Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities*, which aims to improve the state of education for refugees as well as Ugandan children.

The plan is cemented on the building blocks of international law, the right to education being among the basic human rights, but also of the rights of children according to Art. 28, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Uganda's education plan further derives its objectives from the 4th Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations, which envisages "education for all".

In this way, the country acknowledges the economic and social realities of refugee and local populations and proposes a unique approach to address underlying shortcomings. Schools and institutions of learning herein serve as a corner stones to repairing social and emotional well-being – they offer protection and help to bring structures, routines and normalcy to the everyday lives of young displaced persons. As a crucial component for children escaping from war and conflict, education provides the capital necessary to rebuild refugee children's home countries upon their future return.

More than 500,000 children without access to education

Uganda is still a developing country with significant shortcomings in its education system, which is being criticised by a variety of stakeholders. Keeping this in mind, the question arises as of how Uganda can guarantee the education of refugee children without further dropping the already low quality standards for the local population.

Insufficient education system

Despite free-of-charge and universal primary education being one of the great achievements of President Museveni, education-related costs burden Ugandan families. For instance, Ugandan parents are obliged to purchase school uniforms, scholastic materials and to either cover the costs of school meals or to provide their children with food. The proximity of schools is another issue related to transportation costs, especially in rural settings. Moreover, the number of free-of-charge schools is steadily decreasing along with their educational quality. Ugandans desiring to educate their children have to turn away from governmental schools with class sizes of up to 150 students and have no other choice than to opt for a private and costly alternative. This disparity limits families of lower socio-economic classes from accessing quality education.

Most schools in the country are held back from unravelling their quality potential by a chronic lack of school materials, class rooms and well-trained teachers. Schools are further faced with high drop-out rates. The reasons for this are numerous but to a large extent they can be attributed to a lack of financial means, early pregnancies and under-appreciation of education, especially in the rural settings. Even the necessity for parents to pay for meals for their children can have a strong impact on drop-out rates. Studies have shown that free school meals can significantly reduce drop-out rates, which is why the current *Education*

Sports Sector Strategic Plan specifically addresses this challenge. Another grave concern is gender inequality: Girls are vulnerable and more likely to become victims of sexual harassment or violence and thereafter to drop-out. Female students have reported increased discrimination and corporal punishment, both of which are legally banned in Uganda. Local governments, however, do not possess sufficient capacities to uncover such challenges or to introduce sufficient control mechanisms.

Extreme Circumstances in Districts with Refugees

Districts hosting refugees are faced by strikingly precarious situations. More than 500,000 children and youths in those districts have no access to education at all. Among Ugandan children, roughly a third do not attend school. The percentage is even higher among refugee children. Data has been collected in eight refugee-hosting districts: Out of 616,000 refugee children, 57% have no access to education. Schools in these districts, also due to the migration-related population increase, are overcrowded with an average student to teacher ratio of 85:1. This is extreme compared the already high national average of 43:1.

Refugee students moreover face language barriers that complicate their integration into the Ugandan education system. Especially students from the DRC and Burundi face severe impediments when entering the school system.

Another challenge in refugee education is recognition of official certification and lack of documentation from home countries. In some cases, children who have already completed their primary education are, due to lack of certification, required to attend Ugandan primary schools and to pay high fees to sit Primary Leaving Examinations.

Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities

To counter school-drop out among forced migrant children and youth, the Ugandan *Ministry for Education*, in joint cooperation with non-governmental stakeholders, developed a plan to improve education for refugees and local populations alike. It is the first action plan of its kind containing solutions for a crisis in which more than half a million children are not enrolled in schools. The plan merges humanitarian and development-related approaches and is being implemented in 12 refugee-hosting districts. The ultimate goal to enrol 676,000 children for every school year between 2018 and 2021 is tied to a commitment of 395 million USD.

The goals of the *Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities* are highly ambitious and even more so in the light of the current state of education. Uganda is facing major challenges to improve its education system and, in this, to live up to its responsibility to deliver quality education for its own citizens as well as refugee populations.

Whether the plan will carry fruits can only be speculated about. Until end-2019, when all participating partners will get together for a review and first evaluation, observers will have to be patient with formulating outcomes.

Whatever the outcomes of this evaluation may be, in the long run, the Ugandan education system will require relief from hiking numbers of students through the return of those, whose home countries are returning to peace. To see such a development in the near

future, causes of flight and conflicts in neighbouring countries must be resolved. Especially in South Sudan, re-occurring peace talks provide a hopeful outlook but it remains unclear whether peace agreements are being implemented so as to help the 64 different tribes come together peacefully as a nation.

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