



Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa: The Uganda Experience

Introduction:

We are an international community increasingly on the move: in 2015, 244 million people crossed borders, up from 222 million in 2010 and 173 million in 2000. Many people who moved in 2015 did so voluntarily. However, around 65.3 million were forcibly displaced – the highest number ever recorded – as a result of factors including conflict, food insecurity and climate change. These include over 21 million refugees, 3 million asylum seekers and over 40 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). According to the UNHCR, 29% of the world's displaced are hosted in Africa, making the continent the second largest host location for displaced people after Middle East and North Africa. This is having severe consequences, where source, transit and destination countries (though many fall into several categories) are increasingly under pressure to respond.

Situational context of conflict in Africa

In Africa, a number of conflicts have had significant effects on people in the region. For instance, the long-standing conflict in Somalia has caused 1.1 million refugees. In South Sudan, the civil war has killed over 50 000 people since 2013, and forced 3.5 million to flee their homes. The Burundi civil war has led to an estimated 405 000 refugees that have fled to Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the Central African Republic (CAR), over 410 000 people have been internally displaced by the civil war and over 450 000 refugees are sheltering in neighbouring countries, including in the DRC, where, the conflict involving at least 70 armed groups has created an estimated 460 000 refugees and 2.7 million IDPs. As of April 2017,

the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria had created over 1.8 million IDPs and 208 000 refugees. The civil war in Libya has also led to approximately 434 000 internally displaced persons.

All of these conflicts have common drivers that relate to governance issues, identity division, structural violence, exploitation and unequal access to natural resources, among others. In particular, in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa countries – namely Rwanda, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Burundi, DRC, Uganda, Tanzania, CAR, South Sudan, Kenya and Sudan with the exception of Zambia, the involvement of multiple and interlocking regional and international actors in what were initially interstate conflicts added layer of complexity. These conflicts have impacted severely on civilians, not least due to the huge emotional cost they carry for survivors and further reinforce the cycle of violence by provoking reprisals and counter-reprisals.

Uganda and the refugee crisis in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa

Uganda has a long history of providing safe asylum to refugees. It has one of the world's most progressive refugee policies, which notably grants refugees land so they can build a home and enjoy the same rights and access to basic services like education and health, as do nationals. According to UNHCR, Uganda hosts more than 1.2 million refugees, making it Africa's leading refugee-hosting country. Over 70% are refugees from South Sudan alone while the remaining 30% come from Burundi, Rwanda, DRC and Somalia.

However, Uganda's accommodative refugee policy is not without a cost, specifically, in the Western, West Nile and Acholi regions. Settlement facilities (including those in Imvepi, Bidibidi, Pagirinya, and Palorinya) intended to deal with the newly arriving refugees from South Sudan (about 2000 per day), have been over stretched beyond capacity. Key refugee reception centres in the districts of Adjumani, Yumbe, Koboko, Arua, Lamwo, Agago and Moyo currently have more refugees than the host population and the numbers are growing as the conflict in South Sudan continues to escalate. Specifically, the settlement in Bidibidi, which is said to host over 270 000 refugees, is currently the world's largest refugee camp.

The massive refugee influx particularly in West Nile and Acholi region has also led to an increase in employment opportunities in the refugee hosting districts. Many refugees are setting up enterprises that purchase inputs from host-country businesses and households while others sell their labor to businesses inside and outside their settlements. As local incomes increase, so does the demand for goods purchased outside the local economy which stimulates trade with the rest of Uganda, transmitting benefits to other parts of the country. Nevertheless, host communities continue to raise concerns over unfair service provision and access to resources in favour of refugees, which has notably led to violent protests. Refugees are perceived to be enjoying "preferential treatment" in terms of access to services and material without due consultation or consideration of the host populations' needs or concerns. If not addressed, this carries significant conflict risks. The risk of

conflict is also due to heightened ethnic tensions within the refugee settlements, specifically as a spillover of the conflict in south Sudan.

A recent scoping study conducted by Saferworld highlighted other community concerns associated with the refugee influx which include; local insecurity, strained health and education services, inflated food prices in local markets, water crises and an urban housing shortage as NGOs set up offices and middle-class refugees rent homes or buy land. There is also a present danger of profound environmental damage caused by clearing of trees for settlement and other economic activities. If ignored, these factors and others will undermine the positive socio-economic benefits of hosting refugees to local communities, and the peace dividends refugees expect while in Uganda.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In as much as Uganda's refugee policy is very accommodative, **the National Government through the Office of the Prime Minister** needs to adopt and roll out guidelines for service provision which take into consideration the needs of both hosts and refugees.

Humanitarian agencies should involve host communities, including local organisations, when designing and planning their interventions which should take into account local development issues (including livelihoods) and the potential for conflict when delivering services to refugees.

Host communities should be empowered to effectively articulate their grievances with local government authorities, and participate

in decision making on humanitarian service provision. There is also need to build social cohesion between host communities and refugees while supporting reconciliation and trauma healing processes within refugee settlements.

Apart from provision of material lifesaving and recovery support to the refugees, **donors** should also commit a considerable amount of funding to critical development needs of host populations as well as peace-building initiatives between refugees and host populations. A combination of balanced response for refugee and host community needs, conflict management, reconciliation and emphasis on resilience models of aid will not only ensure harmonious co-existence but will also ensure refugees are well set for an eventual return with reduced chances of conflict reprisal.

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Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling live, free from fear and instability. We have been working in Uganda for the last 15 years to prevent and resolve conflict through promotion of conflict-sensitive and human rights-based approaches to development including in natural resource governance, particularly on the land and mineral sector in northern Uganda, west Nile, central Uganda and Karamoja region.

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