

Perspectives of Urban Refugee Children on Humanitarian Actions in Kampala



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INTRODUCTION

Ahead of the commemoration of the Day of the African Child (16 June 2019) under the theme *'Humanitarian Action in Africa: Children's Rights First'*, and as a leading Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants, Refugee Law Project (RLP) in consultation with leaders of refugee-led community support groups, organised a roundtable discussion on the theme of the day to explore how humanitarian workers can strengthen and promote the protection of rights of refugee children. The 2019 Day of the African Child (DAC) coincided with Sunday – a weekend in Uganda. The urban refugee children and their caretakers braved a cold and drizzly Saturday morning to participate in a roundtable dialogue on children's rights and protection in humanitarian settings.

The humanitarian crisis confronting Africa and elsewhere as a result of natural and or human error has seen millions of people uprooted from places they call 'home'. Many are internally displaced, while others dare perilous journeys across international borders. As of 30 April 2019, 60 percent of the 1.25 million refugees in Uganda are children (UNHCR & Office of the Prime Minister, 2019a). Whether accompanied or unaccompanied, children have become the face of forced migration – perhaps one of the reasons UNHCR refers to the contemporary refugee crisis as a 'children crisis' (UNHCR, 2012). But where are children in conversations that concern them? Guided by the principle of 'Nothing About Us Without Us', RLP, which has long-standing experience working with and mentoring refugee-led support groups, dedicated the day to urban refugee children – who form 67 percent of the 63,125 refugees living in Kampala (UNHCR & Office of the Prime Minister, 2019b) – and their care-takers.

Why the roundtable? As one of the events tailored to honour and respect all children affected by gross forms of human rights violations and abuses, we agree with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights & Welfare of the Child in arguing that the DAC should not be commemorated as a one-off event but rather, as a process that builds on previous events (African Union, 2019). Building on last year's commemoration, RLP in May 2019 organised roundtable discussions with children and with their parents/guardians to discuss sexual violence in conflict. These discussions were held simultaneously in separate and parallel spaces. After long but fruitful deliberations on bridging the sexual violence – torture divide, it was both a request from the children and their care-takers and the deliberate effort of RLP to organise another dialogue on child protection, this time with a focus on children's rights in

the context of humanitarian and development work. This roundtable was therefore developed as part of the commemoration of the DAC.

METHODOLOGY

Representatives of 4 refugee-led support groups namely, Men of Hope Refugee Support Group in Uganda, Association for Women with Children Born out of Rape (AMERUV) Support Group, Association for Torture Survivors, and Association of Persons with Disabilities were consulted to select participants to participate in the roundtable discussions. Participants were contacted prior to the event and were asked to attend with their children between the ages of 13-17 years old (if they had any). The roundtable brought together a total of 11 adult caretakers (5 women, 6 men), and 9 children (3 boys, 6 girls) – all of whom are school going. It also involved 11 staff (6 women, 5 men) who were tasked with facilitating discussions, providing on-spot psychological first aid, ensuring physical security and providing logistical support.

In an attempt to ensure coherent information sharing, all participants were placed in one room for welcome remarks and were briefed on the event. The joint briefing was to address expectations, security concerns and other fears, questions, and concerns that participants might have. Pertinent issues of safety, confidentiality, and physical security were also discussed and addressed. Consent to participate was sought from caretakers on behalf of their children and assent from the children themselves was also obtained. Thereafter, participants were divided into two groups; one for caretakers, the other for children – with RLP staff acting as facilitators and rapporteurs for the conversations.

Discussion in both groups was guided by the Socio-Ecological Model – a framework for the prevention of violence, which has the ultimate goal of stopping violence before it begins (Golden, McLeroy, Green, Earp, & Lieberman, 2015). The Social-Ecological Model looks at individuals, relationships, community, through to society and institutions. To guide the conversation, the facilitator (an RLP staff member) started the conversation by asking the children to look at themselves and their relationships with household members, refugee and host community members, and institutions. As such, discussions were guided from both inward (individual) and outward (institutional) perspectives.

DISCUSSIONS

KNOWLEDGE OF THE DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

What do children know about their rights and the Day of the African Child?

From the conversation, it was clear that the children understood the background of the Day of the African Child, its origin, and why it's commemorated. When asked where they acquired this knowledge, the majority responded that they learnt about the day from their teachers in school. It was clear from the discussion that the children understood that they have a right to education, medical care, care from parents, housing, etc. Whereas several rights were discussed, and cognizant that no right is more important than the other, the conversation, as guided by the children, concentrated on those rights that directly affect them at home and at school.

THE URBAN REFUGEE CHILD AT HOME

From the conversation, children noted that the difficulties of life in displacement – let alone urban life – force parents to resort to all possible means to struggle to survive and to put food on the table. When asked what their life is like at home, the children quickly reported several cases of debilitating conditions at home and a wanting relationship between children and adults, as well as the differences between the lived realities of refugee children and those of their host counterparts.

On the right to housing, a child noted;

“If we compare our lives to those of the host, our neighbours are doing fairly well. We live in houses labelled as ‘houses for refugees’ – with poor drainage. When it rains, water enters our house and yet those of our neighbours seem fine. This is the reason we sometimes leave our homes to wander on our own”.

Where are parents/guardians/caregivers?

It was clear from the discussion that children had a fairly elaborate understanding of the daily struggles of their parents and the sources of their stress. From the children's perspective, they do not necessarily need tangible resources, but rather time to stay and talk to their parents/caregivers. As a result of having limited time, and the pressure to meet daily household needs, parents hardly understand how children adjust in displacement settings. One participant noted;

“It hurts me because sometimes, I need to talk to my parents, to tell them what happened during the day, the challenges I went through – just to talk to them at least. However, there is no time to do that as my mum comes home very late from selling jewellery and only to go straight to bed”.

Are the challenges gendered?

Following what appears to be a gendered narrative of problems children grapple with at home, contention arose between the boys and girls, each of whom believed that they experienced more problems with parents than the other.

During the conversation, a girl noted;

“Sometimes, our parents blame us for no reason. Sometimes you delay because of jam and yet our parents think we have been with our boyfriends.”

In demonstrating the dilemma boys go through, a male participant had this to say;

“We boys we suffer most, our parents tend to listen to the girls and leave us on our own – they do not care about us”.

It was only after a long conversation that both boys and girls agreed that they have similar but also distinct challenges in managing relationships at home and with community members. However, it was clear that boys were left to explore the city and, where possible, to find something to do in order to earn some money for themselves and their family.

Children’s interpretation of challenges at home

According to the children, communication between parents and children is an important entry point for strengthening family cohesion and addressing psychological challenges that affect both parents and children alike. A participant reported;

“We see our parents looking stressed from the pressure of landlords and other issues. As such, our parents do not have time to stay with us. All these compounds onto our psychological wellbeing – and it affects our concentration in school”.

How do children respond?

When asked what they do in response to the apparent ‘absence of parents’, participants reported communicating their frustrations to their parents by using words, including;

“Mum, you don’t love me, you love other children. It looks like you have another child outside because you no longer care about me”.

How can we strengthen the relationship between children and their parents or guardians?

When asked how best to strengthen family cohesion, participants noted that continued conversations between parents and children are important. According to one participant,

“Sometimes we do not understand the challenges our parents go through. Equally, parents do not understand the challenges refugee children go through. In the process, each party feels the other is bothering and/or disturbing each other”.

Herein, participants recommended more information sessions and tailored discussions between children and their parents but above all, continued engagements with parents and guardians from both refugee and host communities.

THE URBAN REFUGEE CHILD AT SCHOOL

Immediately after the word ‘school’ was mentioned, a participant quickly had this to say;

“It hurts us that we know the value of education, but our parents cannot afford our school fees. We keep dropping out of school because our parents have difficulties acquiring school fees. We fear that no one will guide us in the future, and that our dreams might never come true”.

Corporal Punishment alive and well despite recent criminalisation

According to the Children (Amendment) Act, 2016, (Refer to 106A 102), *“A person of authority in any institution of learning shall not subject a child to any form of corporal punishment”* (The Uganda Gazette, 2016). However, during the roundtable discussion, not a single child remained silent on issues of violence, abuse, and discrimination at school as perpetrated by fellow pupils (refugees and hosts), teachers, and other non-teaching staff. Whereas the recently amended Children’s Act criminalises beating and corporal punishments, almost all participants reported recent cases of flogging and other forms of physical abuse, including slaps while at school.

In addition to corporal punishments, participants also reported cases of verbal and emotional abuse. One teacher had this to say; *“You Congolese! You eat Monkeys and bring us diseases”*. According to participants, such statements are not uncommon as they frequently face similar derogatory statements while at school from fellow pupils/students, as well as school staff.

Participants also described differential treatment between children of the hosts and those of refugees. According to the participants, when a refugee child reports a case of abuse to school authorities, they are not taken seriously; however, when the child of a national reports the same, rather quick action is taken. An example was given where a refugee child was badly beaten and hospitalised as a result. However, when the school administrators were approached over the issue, nothing was done by the headteacher.

What are the repercussions? According to the children, the marked differential treatment at school forces them to stay put in times of challenges, and to stay silent on cases of abuse because they can predict the repercussions and/or responses.

Do children report? If not, why? If so, what happens?

Almost all the children reported having consulted their teachers and school administrators on the challenges they grapple with in the hands of fellow pupils and school teaching and non-teaching staff. However, from their narratives, very little is done to practically address the issues reported beyond re-assurance that *'it will be fine'*.

Are there 'well intentioned' teachers?' Whereas all of the children experienced one or more cases of abuse in school, a few noted that not all teachers are the same; some are kind and treat refugee children well. According to one participant, *"...this could be due to my good performance in class"*. Another participant noted;

"My teacher for English likes Congolese and sometimes guides us on what to do when confronted by Uganda nationals. For example, he tells us not to introduce ourselves to others as refugees and/or Congolese. This helps a lot because on one occasion, a woman returned my money when I had gone to buy something – simply because they got to know that I'm a Congolese".

Coping mechanisms such as those advised by the teacher in the quotation above, appear to have been adopted as a means of tackling xenophobia. However, these coping mechanisms, which while meant to protect refugee children, also distort their sense of identity and place it under critical attack. Looking at the quotation above, a number of questions come to mind; What does it mean for a refugee child to try to 'let go' of their sense of identity and belonging? What does it mean not to identify as a person from the country that you actually originate from? What other options do such children have to address this dilemma? For how long will

a refugee child 'deny' their identity – a pillar that not only defines who a person is at the very first instance, but that also affects their perspective on all aspects of life?

THE URBAN REFUGEE CHILD IN THE COMMUNITY

Whereas refugee children involved in previous engagements with Refugee Law Project noted a great degree of peaceful co-existence with children from the host communities, this particular group had very little positive to report on their live realities with children from the host communities. They reported a general sense of fear, resentment, and hatred as they interact in their community. To many, just hearing the word 'Congolese' attracts negative statements. One child reported *"... our family friend was killed after being accused of being a thief. Now we fear even walking alone in public"*.

How do refugee children navigate life with other children, especially those of the host community? Participants noted with concern that children of hosts frequently discriminate against them – behaviour interpreted by participants as being instructed by the parents/guardians of those children. In demonstrating the challenges refugee children face while playing with children of hosts, one participant cited an example whereby his ball was pierced with a knife by the host children after the ball entered their compound. According to the child, this was accompanied by vulgar words and insults including; *"You Congolese, why don't you go and play in Congo?"*.

Differential treatment in accessing essential resources

Participants highlighted several cases demonstrating differential treatment between refugee children and those of hosts. In accessing resources like water from community boreholes, some children reported being asked to carry few jerrycans, being asked to fetch water long after others have fetched, and in some cases, being denied water altogether.

Besides access to community resources, participants also reported challenges associated with accessing and taking up health-related services. While discussing refugee children's experience in hospitals, participants reported that because refugees are somewhat recognisable (from speech, accent, language, dressing, and sometimes appearances), some community members leverage such peculiarities to extort monies and discriminate on prices when refugees try and access medical care – a situation that forces many into self-medication with all the risks associated. A participant observed; *"When we go to hospitals, we struggle*

to get medicines. We have to try to 'self-medicate' but that is not affordable... and that is why some children die even in circumstances which could have been preventable”.

Are refugee children willing to collaborate with those of the host community in advocating for positive transformation?

Some participants noted that refugee children are sometimes denied participation in community events including Music Dance and Drama (MDD) – which is one means of reaching and engaging with communities on key issues of concern, including initiatives designed to sensitize parents on child protection. One child noted;

“We struggle to join MDD groups, but we are denied often because they say we are not their tribe and as such we cannot dance their 'dance'. However, some of us can actually dance more than them [owners of the dance]”.

How do children respond?

From the discussion, it was clear that refugee children are neither passive recipients of aid nor passive members of their households. Instead, they too contribute to household and community transformation. But how do children do that? From the discussion, children reported using both 'positive', and 'negative' coping mechanisms. Some children relentlessly seek attention from their parents. Others achieve this through provoking their parents/guardians to listen and or attend to their needs. However, other children resort to isolation and withdraw from spaces within which they could interact with their parents/guardians. Some participants reported having channelled their frustrations positively by, for example, looking for fellow refugee children to play and interact with, rather than mixing with children from the host community due to the dilemma involved. According to participants, this solution gives them a sense of belonging and allows them to engage with people with whom they share a language and identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the African Union (2019), DAC calls for *“...a serious introspection and commitment towards addressing the numerous challenges facing children across the continent”*. As such, and as a human rights organisation keen to work with children and communities in promoting and upholding children's rights, we join the world in listening to refugee children and discussing means of strengthening their rights. From the discussion, participants basically had one key recommendation for their parents/guardians; *“Tell our*

parents to find time to listen to us”; however, they also had the following messages for humanitarian actors;

Address livelihood challenges

Livelihood challenges are presented as the main reason for family tensions. The quest for livelihood drives parents in all sorts of directions, leaving them with little time to communicate with their children. The children call on humanitarian actors to empower and support parents and caregivers so that they can, in turn, better support their children and secure a future for them.

Address fraud and corruption

Besides the emphasis on *“Employ honest people”*, participants called for institutional strengthening and accountability to curb fraud and corruption. A participant noted; *“Some staff of organisations are not kind. You hear that money meant for refugees has been swindled – and here we are – not in school”*. *“Do organisations consult previous employers prior to employing them?”* asked one participant. *“If nothing is done”*, emphasised the participant, *“...it damages reputation of organisations”*.

Listen to Children

Participants reported challenges seeking and obtaining appointments to speak to staff of refugee serving organisations. Some children noted that staff might say *“We will call you back”*; however, follow-up never happens. It was emphasized that children, like adults, need time and safer spaces where they can highlight issues that affect them.

Support parents in supporting their children

It has been argued that education cannot be left behind. As such, humanitarian workers need to re-think their approaches to working with refugee parents and caretakers. As discussed above, parents struggle to raise hard-earned cash to provide basic household necessities and to support their children’s education.

Recognise and support all urban refugee children in Uganda

Whereas Uganda has disaggregated data on refugees in Uganda, the circumstances of urban refugees in Uganda’s refugee regime are only understood in the context of Kampala. As such, Uganda is yet to document and publish disaggregated data on refugees (including children) in other urban centres outside Kampala. This notable gap frustrates attempts to arrive at a comprehensive picture of the situation of urban refugee children in Uganda in general.

Educate and sensitise school authorities on the plight of refugees

Whereas a few teachers were reported to be kind and considerate to refugees, the general experiences of participant refugee children at school demonstrates the need to engage school authorities on the plight of refugee children under their tutorship. Herein, children recommended that school administrators, including headteachers, be targeted through information session and awareness raising sessions.

CONCLUSION

As we commemorate the DAC 2019, and as we call upon humanitarian (and development) actors to protect and promote children's rights (alongside sensitisation on responsibilities), may this day remind us of our long commitment to fostering a strong body of knowledge and practice towards the protection of children in crisis in Africa and elsewhere. From our roundtable discussions with children, it is clear that their understanding of rights is closely connected to their lived realities at home – many of which are understood through the lenses of livelihood and access to and uptake of essential needs. Realising children's dreams requires not only concerted and continued efforts, but deliberate efforts in listening to and learning from children and their caretakers – transformative participation is the beginning!

Nice Commemorations!

Write-up for caregivers coming next!

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