



Refugee Law Project

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TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATION IS ESSENTIAL FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT IN UGANDA'S DEVELOPMENT

As we commemorate the Day of the African Child today 16 June 2018, Refugee Law Project is pleased to join the international community, and more so, the African continent, to drum for inclusive and sustainable development for children, and to advocate for transformation in the lives of its current and future young generations. Commemorated on the theme “*Leave No Child Behind for Africa's Development*” (international) and “*Leave No Child Behind for Uganda's Development*” (national), this year's commemoration specifically targets those children who are not benefiting from Africa's growth and development. As a refugee and human rights organisation, we argue that refugee children are being left out of development initiatives, with serious effects on Uganda's and Africa's development.

The contemporary refugee crisis has particularly taken a stern toll on children. More than 230 million children have been affected by 32 conflicts registered in 26 countries in 2014, and half of the global population of refugees are children. According to UNHCR (2012), the refugee crisis is a ‘*children crisis*’. Such conflicts, described by (UNICEF 2017) as a ‘global reality’, cause under-explored physical and psychological damage to children. Uganda has (with the South Sudanese influx) witnessed the largest migration crisis in East Africa since the 1994 Rwandan genocide as 1 in 300 people is a refugee (Sim 2017; Amamukirori 2017). Currently, of an estimated 1.4 million refugees in Uganda, some 881,373 (as of March 2018) are children below 18 years – representing 63 per cent of the total refugee population.

Africa's history in relation to the protection of its minors is one of both hope and doom. The continent harbours some of the world's direst catastrophes – amidst its glorious natural resources which some people argue to be its ‘biggest curse’. DR Congo, for instance, with its long history of militias, is often satirized as “the rape capital of the world”. A critical mass of African children continues to witness unspeakable levels of adversity. Many languish in poverty, dying of hunger and severe malnutrition, as well as preventable and other ‘strange’ diseases including so-called “nodding syndrome” in northern Uganda, and many more are forced to trek painful miles in pursuit for safe havens.

As we commemorate this day, and with special interests that no refugee child is left behind in

any development initiative, Refugee Law Project calls upon national, regional, and international actors including Government of the Republic of Uganda, academics, donors, national and international Non-Governmental and Community Based Organisations, cultural and faith-based institutions, the media, other Civil Society Organisations, community leaders, and all responsible persons to;

Promote transformative participation of refugee children in development programmes

This year's theme challenges all actors to embrace transformative participation of children in planning, implementation, and monitoring of activities. For people familiar with working with children, it's not uncommon to see issues about children being discussed without children represented. Guided by the principle "*Nothing about us without us*", and resonating with Cooper (2008) who argues that "*Learning from children is not yet an exercise that is achieved without special efforts*", we call for active engagements of adolescent refugees in debates, discussions, and discourse on issues relating to refugee children.

The concept of participation is central to development and humanitarian projects. Scholars for example (Msukwa & Taylor 2011; S White 1996) have argued that participation must be seen as political and therefore requires political approaches. May this commemoration remind us to fast forward away from nominal participation aimed at simply achieving representation of disadvantaged groups, to transformative participation where refugee children actively engage in decision making and take collective, and age-friendly actions against injustices as an important step forward to realising successfully and sustainable development.

Strengthen protection mechanisms for urban refugee children

The pursuit of urban refuge is steadily on the rise. Currently, over 60 per cent of refugees globally seek safety in cities and other urban centres. However, reports and research studies show that most governments in Africa and elsewhere regard refugees as potential threats to security and economic burdens, and hence believe they should be managed from within gazetted refugee settlements, and where possible discouraged from settling in urban centres (Fabos & Kibreab 2002). Notwithstanding these perspectives, and due to several 'push' and 'pull' factors, many refugee children long to *escape* from gazetted refugee settlements to urban centres including Kampala. However, life in urban areas is equally tough – forcing many children onto the streets, with some obliged to engage in transactional sex.

In Uganda's context, we applaud the Government of Uganda and its partners for the progressive and 'forward-thinking' legislative and policy frameworks on refugees, including the Refugees Act 2006 which provides for relative freedom of movement and choice of location to settle. As more children head to urban centres, there is a need to adopt, adapt and implement the UNHCR' *Alternatives to Camps Policy* and *Urban Refugee Policy*.

Increase funding for refugee children-related activities

Most African countries rely on financial and technical assistance from donors to finance a significant percentage of their annual budgets. Similarly, humanitarian and development initiatives targeting refugee children are largely donor-funded (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil 2004). However, refugee work is generally hit with chronic underfunding – Africa hit hardest. In 2016, Uganda took triple the number of refugees that arrived in Europe yet only 17 per cent of its response budget was funded. Equally, only 40 per cent of the US\$251 million requested was secured to respond to the unprecedented influx of South Sudanese refugees (MSF 2017).

This chronic funding crisis affects refugee children the most. According to the Counting Pennies Report, the first of its kind to have estimated international spending on violence against children, only 2 cents for every dollar spent on ‘humanitarian aid’ go to protecting children from violence (Tew & Wynne 2017; Vernaelde 2014). Nonetheless, children remain the face of humanitarian work and development. Despite children’s faces being used to attract donations from generous individuals and institutions, only a tiny percentage reaches them. Partners need to strengthen their support to governments and institutions by increasing investments on children, especially vulnerable refugee children who without such support may never lead dignified lives.

Support refugee children’s education

Whereas national and international actors continue to support refugee education – and with relatively progressive policies on the provision of basic needs for refugee children, access to pre-primary, and secondary education remains a practical challenge for refugee children. Whilst the UNHCR’s Global Policy Regarding Urban Refugees (UNHCR 1997) explicates that UNHCR’s services are not affected by location, the practice is somewhat different. Access to preparatory and secondary schools remains a huge challenge for many refugees. There is just one refugee-established secondary school supporting Maaji I, II, & III refugee settlement. Equally, there is one secondary school within the Palabek refugee settlement.

Perhaps the time is now to think through some words related to child protection. For how long will we let go unabated, circumstances leading to children being labelled ‘street children’, ‘child mothers’, ‘child-headed household’ and ‘child soldiers’, and above all, the reason why they become refugees in the first place. Children cannot only be looked as victims of circumstances who only require protection, but also as active agents of change whose efforts must not go unnoticed.

Children possess unlimited potential, which if unveiled and supported, can contribute significantly to transforming their lives and the continent’s development. Realising Africa’s Agenda 2063 (The Africa We Want), a strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of Africa established by member states of the African Union, can be accelerated if children are at the centre of all programming – the absence of which risks undermining the relative

achievements garnered. Equally, 'Transforming our World' through the Sustainable Development Goals will remain a herculean task if children's contributions are ignored. May this day therefore re-awaken our zeal to take urgent actions to support and protect all children within our reach and means, and above all, rekindle our commitment to denouncing violence and discrimination against children, be they refugee or host, girls or boys

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