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Uganda and the refugee problem: challenges and opportunities

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Uganda is one of the top refugee hosting countries in Africa and the world. It has been praised as a generous country with progressive refugee policies and laws that reflect the country's national, regional and international obligations. However, a number of challenges ranging from increasing refugee numbers, protracted refugee situations, the burden of hosting of refugees, to limited resources and little international support threaten Uganda's hospitality. This article looks at the major refugee protection challenges that confront Uganda. It further addresses some of the emerging opportunities which if seized could provide effective protection to the refugees. Finally, the paper concludes with policy implications.

Key words: Refugees, refugee problem, challenges, opportunities, Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

The UNHCR's Annual Global Trends report notes that by the end of 2017, Uganda was hosting 1.4 million, the highest number in the country's history. Uganda was the 3rd largest refugee hosting country in the world (after Turkey and Pakistan) and the largest in Africa (UNHCR, 2018: 3). By the December 2018, this number had reduced to 1.1 million after the biometric verification exercise done by Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR (OPM and UNHCR, 2018). The majority of these refugees come from neighboring countries and the wider region, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Eritrea among others.

Uganda is located in East Africa neighboring Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Democratic

Republic of Congo (DRC). Her location makes it the favorite country for those in search of asylum in the region. Uganda is well known for its open door policies (World Bank Group, 2016; Ahimbisibwe, 2018). Uganda adopted the settlement approach in responding to refugee crisis as opposed to camps in countries like Kenya (Bagenda, Naggaga, & Smith, 2003). This has made the country relatively hospitable for asylum seekers and refugees. With the exception of certain refugee nationalities, Uganda generally has pursued an "open door policy" to many refugees fleeing their countries of origin. From the late 1950s to early 1980s and 1990s to today, Uganda's policy can be characterized as open and welcoming to the majority of refugees.

According to UNHCR, "Uganda is over all welcoming of

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refugees. The admission rate is one of the highest in the world, and Uganda is unique in the region in hosting refugees. Refugees are kept in refugee settlements where are supposed to be self-reliant. Those in the settlements are provided land, which they can till for a living. According to Government policy, refugees who are self-sufficient are allowed to stay in urban areas and those who need humanitarian assistance reside in settlements" (UNHCR, 2011).

This paper argues that although Uganda has been praised as a generous country, a number of challenges ranging from increasing refugee numbers, protracted refugee situations, the burden of hosting of refugees, limited resources and little international support threaten the country's hospitality. The paper however believes that there are several emerging opportunities which if seized could provide effective protection to the refugees.

The paper is structured as follows: The next section explains the methodology and subsequently the paper looks at a brief history of refugees in Uganda and analyses the major refugee protection challenges and opportunities. It concludes with policy implications.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was adopted for this study in both data collection and analysis. This study is based mainly on secondary materials collected from various sources. The data was collected from documentary materials such as textbooks, journals, magazines, newspapers, government reports and the internet sources. And in terms of analysis of data, the study used descriptive and analytical techniques. Therefore, the research was based on systematic analysis of content of documentation. The data collected was subjected to textual analysis.

Brief history and origin of refugees in Uganda

Uganda's experience with refugees started during the Second World War when Europeans displaced by the war were settled on its territory (Gingyera Pinyicwa, 1998: 5). These refugees included 7000 prisoners of war mainly from Poland but also from Germany, Romania and Austria among others. They were settled at Nyabyeya in the present day Masindi district and Kojja (Mpunge) Mukono district. This influx was soon followed by numerous refugees generated by unrest in the aftermath of the various struggles for independence in neighboring countries (Gingyera Pinyicwa, 1998: 5).

In the 1950s, Kenyans staged an armed rebellion against the British colonial government. The colonial government ruthlessly suppressed the armed Mau Mau anti-colonial movement. A number of Kenyans fled into Uganda as refugees. The conflicts in Zaire/DRC in the 1950s and 1960s in the aftermath of Independence and Lumumba's assassination in 1961 forced thousands of Congolese to flee into Uganda. Many of them were settled in Kyaka 1 in present day Kyenjojo district. The

political turmoil in Rwanda forced Rwandan Tutsi to flee the country in 1959 and early 1960s. They fled into neighboring countries Uganda, Tanzania, Congo and Burundi. They were allocated pastoral land and settled in Nakivale, Oruchinga in Mbarara District (now Isingiro district). Others were settled in Rwamwanja, Kyaka and Kamwengye in Kyenjojo and Kabarole districts (Mulumba and Olema, 2009: 10).

Gingyera and Pirouet observe that the new wave of refugees into Uganda came in 1955 from the then Anglo-Egyptian condominium of the Sudan. The Anyanya movement that involved South Sudanese fighting for self-determination led Sudanese to cross into Uganda in search of refuge. Some 80,000 southern Sudanese crossed into Uganda after an army mutiny in Sudan (Gingyera Pinyicwa, 1998; Pirouet, 1988). Most of them were settled in West Nile in North Western Uganda. Following the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, the Sudanese refugees were repatriated.

The Sudanese influx resumed from 1983 to 2005 when the Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) were engaged in armed rebellion against the Khartoum Government. The majority started to return to South Sudan in 2005 after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

Since the 1990s, the country also received a number of refugees from Burundi, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Kenya. According to Uganda's settlement policy, refugees are required to live in settlements where they can be assisted. However, a good number of refugees live in urban areas where they look after themselves without any assistance from the UNHCR and her implementing partners.

In 1994 and after the Tutsi refugees returned to Rwanda, Hutu refugees crossed into Uganda, DRC, Tanzania and Burundi. According to UNHCR, by February 2016 there were 17,176 Rwandan refugees in the country UNHCR, 2016b). Rwandan refugees are settled in Nakivale, Oruchinga, Kyaka II and Kyangwali refugee settlements. Other Rwandan refugees are secondary movers –those that came from neighboring countries such as Tanzania and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) following the forced repatriations of 1996/1997, and who faced persecution upon return because of their previous flight and then fled to Uganda (Karooma, 2014: 11). Rwandan asylum seekers (both Hutu and Tutsi) continue to come to Uganda claiming persecution, human rights violations and dictatorship in Rwanda.

Although around 2000 the UNHCR and the Ugandan government implemented a repatriation programme for Congolese refugees, many more Congolese refugees have fled into Uganda due to the conflicts in the Eastern part of the country. According to UNHCR, Uganda hosted 240,000 Congolese refugees by December 2017. This number was estimated to stand at 300,000 by the end of 2018 (UNHCR, 2018b). However, although the majority of Rwandan refugees repatriated in 1994 after the

genocide and the taking over by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, many still maintain relatives and property in Uganda (Mulumba and Olema, 2009: 10). Kenya again generated refugees in 2007/2008 due to violence following the 2007 elections. They crossed into Eastern Uganda and were hosted in refugee settlements while others were self-settled in urban areas.

A new influx of South Sudanese refugees took place from December 2013 when fighting broke out in South Sudan between the Government and the opposition. South Sudanese refugees have continued to flee into Uganda since and their number stands at more than 1 million as of January 2018 (UNHCR, 2018a).

Challenges of refugee protection

As a top refugee hosting country in Africa and the world, Uganda is faced with a number of challenges as it receives and protects refugees. In addition, Uganda is struggling to provide services to her own population. Interrogating the challenges affecting Uganda is important in understanding the quality and quantity of protection of refugees on her soil.

These challenges are one way of understanding the burden faced by poor refugee hosting countries. The presence of refugees comes with economic, environmental, security, political and diplomatic challenges that influence the decisions and policies on refugees. For example, states might adopt restrictive refugee policies in an attempt to mitigate these burdens. Also donor countries and humanitarian agencies are able to appreciate the magnitude of the problems and look for ways to support host countries. Under the principle of burden sharing, states have obligations of supporting each other to meet the needs of refugees. This section interrogates the challenges of refugee protection: increase in refugee numbers, protracted refugee situation, limited resources and little international support and security and environmental burden.

Increase in refugee numbers

One of the significant challenges facing Uganda is the increase in refugee numbers. Uganda is located in an unstable region where conflicts continue to generate refugees. The conflicts in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Burundi are responsible for considerable refugee flows into Uganda. For example, the South Sudan conflict has generated more than 1 million refugees to Uganda (UNHCR, 2018). Uganda is projected to host around 1.8 million refugees by December 2018 (UNICEF, 2017). The increase in refugee numbers is putting much pressure on the country's resources and social services. The Guardian reported that "... the unprecedented influx from South Sudan

coupled with food shortage, drought and high unemployment means that hospitality is waning, especially in some areas where refugees now outnumber the indigenous populations" (The Guardian, 2017). The same challenge has been reported by the Uganda Government, United Nations and UNHCR. Thus, "The unprecedented surge in refugee numbers and the protracted stay of refugees in Uganda is imposing excessive pressure on overstretched state and host community resources" (Government of Uganda, United Nations and UNHCR, 2017: 7).

The increase in refugee numbers also threatens government policy of allocating land to refugees. Given that land is a fixed resource, and the already high population growth in Uganda, it is highly unlikely that this model of land allocation can be sustained in the long run (Ahaibwe and Ntale 2018). Already government has reduced the size of land given to the new arrivals of South Sudanese refugees. According to Ahaibwe and Ntale (2018), "Land size per refugee household has already been reduced from 50 x 50 m to about 30 x 30 m in order to accommodate new arrivals." This situation gets worse with the continuous influx of refugees fleeing conflicts in neighboring countries. Reducing the size of land given to refugees will negatively affect the self-reliance strategy where refugees are required to grow their own food and supplement the rations distributed by humanitarian agencies.

Furthermore, the increase in refugee numbers has the potential of causing tensions between refugees and host communities, as competition for land and social services increases (Relief web, 2018; Refugee Law Project, 2014). A similar observation was made by the EU Ambassador to Uganda who in January 2018 noted that it was only a matter of time before more violence spilled into the refugee settlements (Ahaibwe and Ntale, 2018).

Protracted refugee situations

UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as "one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. A refugee in this situation is often unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance" (UNHCR, 2004: 1). UNHCR further notes that a protracted refugee situation is one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries (UNHCR, 2004: 2).

According to the World Bank (2016: 71), "Uganda is faced with a large number of refugees caught in protracted situations, unable to return to their countries of origin, sometimes for decades". It further argues that "most of the refugees in Uganda are in a situation of protracted displacement with limited prospects for a

“durable solution” (World Bank, 2016: 6). Examples of refugees trapped in a protracted refugee situation in Uganda include Congolese, South Sudanese and Somalis. Other refugee nationalities like Rwandans, Burundians, Eritreans and Ethiopians have stayed in Uganda for long. However, their numbers are below 25,000, the UNHCR figure used in defining protracted refugee situations.

Protracted refugee situations present a challenge to countries of asylum hosting permanent refugees without any foreseeable solution to their plight. In a situation where international support is limited, host countries are faced with a dilemma of responding to the needs of refugees. They have responded by restricting refugee rights, encampment, restricting movement and employment (UNHCR, 2006: 114-115; Milner, 2009). Such an approach is a violation of refugee rights and an abdication of states from their international obligations (Milner, 2009; UNHCR, 2006).

Protracted refugee situations are fueled by the continuous conflicts and fruitless peace processes in countries of origin. In Burundi, the conflict has persisted with President Nkurunziza showing no signs of leaving power. There are signs which suggest that Nkurunziza is consolidating himself in power. A referendum that could keep him in power until 2034 is being planned in May 2018 (Daily Nation, 2018). All this is happening as the peace process under the mediation and facilitation of President Museveni of Uganda and former President Benjamin Mkapa of Tanzania has stalled (Kasajja, 2016).

The conflict in South Sudan that erupted on 15th December 2013 has shown no signs of abating. Despite the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) led peace process to end the conflict, fighting continues in several parts of the country. The August 2015 peace agreement between South Sudan People’s Movement/Army in Government (SPLM/A) and forces loyal to former Vice President Riek Machar (South Sudan People’s Movement/Army in Opposition) has been violated several times. All the developments leave little hope for the peaceful resolution of the conflict in South Sudan and the reduction of forced displacement.

The previous examples are a reminder that refugee movements and protracted refugee situations will continue in the near future as long as conflicts continue and peace processes do not bear fruit. It also means that the search for durable solutions like voluntary repatriation will remain a challenge.

Limited resources and little international support

Uganda has limited resources and little international support. Being a top refugee hosting country in Africa and the world, it faces demands in meeting the needs of a large number of refugees. In fact Uganda’s open-door asylum policy and progressive development-oriented

model presents a challenge, requiring additional international support. The unprecedented surge in refugee numbers and the protracted stay of refugees is imposing excessive pressure on overstretched state and host community resources (Government of Uganda, United Nations and UNHCR, 2017: 7). On the other hand, Uganda has one of the fastest growing populations in the world at an annual growth rate of 3.28% by 2018 (World Population Review, 2018). This means that Uganda also faces major challenges of meeting the demands of its nationals.

As already mentioned, one of the principles of refugee protection is burden sharing where states assist each other in looking after refugees (Milner, 2000). According to Amnesty International, “In line with international human rights and refugee law, states have obligations to provide support to each other to host refugees. This is known as the principle of responsibility sharing” (Amnesty International, 2017: 5). This principle makes it possible to ease the burden of hosting refugees, especially in developing countries.

However, this principle of responsibility sharing has been overlooked by states especially the developed North. Developing countries are faced with large refugee numbers amidst declining international support. Amnesty International argues that “It is a principle that has been undermined by repeated failures of the international community in recent years to support countries hosting large numbers of refugees. Uganda, and the refugees of South Sudan, has become the latest victims of a collective and shameful failure of international cooperation” (Amnesty International, 2017: 5). “By far the most significant challenge that Uganda’s refugee response faces is the major shortfall in funding support from the international community” (Amnesty International, 2017: 16).

The UNHCR appeals for refugee funding have received little support. Amnesty International (2017: 16) observes that “donors have also repeatedly failed to provide sufficient funding to the UN humanitarian appeals for refugees in Uganda. As humanitarian appeals remain underfunded, the risks and vulnerabilities of refugees get worse as well as pressures on domestic resources” (Government of Uganda, United Nations and UNHCR, 2017). A number of examples show the dismal response to humanitarian appeals. In 2017 the UNHCR appealed for USD 674 Million for the South Sudan refugee crisis in Uganda but by January 2018 only 34% of this had been realized (World Vision, 2018: 1).

In June 2017, the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres co-hosted the Refugee Solidarity Summit in Kampala, hoping to use the occasion to get the attention of the international community to raise \$2 billion for the support of refugees and host communities in Uganda. The summit came at a time when there were increasing numbers of refugees coming into the country and a declining amount

of resources to cater for their needs as well as increased social economic pressures on the communities that host them”(Ruhakana, 2017). But they only managed to get only \$358 million (Relief web, 2018). This means that 82.3 percent of the target of two billion dollars is yet to be realized (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Young Leaders Think Tank, 2017:9).

Also, “the Ugandan chapter of the South Sudan 2017 Regional Refugee Response Plan of USD 673.2 million, is only 17% funded; and ReHoPE, the component that is implemented through UN agencies has a funding gap of USD 104 million out of USD 213 million for 2017” (Government of Uganda, United Nations and UNHCR, 2017: 7). Therefore, “the dismal response from the international community has put a severe strain on Uganda, the UN and non-governmental organizations’ ability to meet the needs of the refugees” (Amnesty International, 2017: 5).

As Muthoni Wanyeki, Amnesty Regional Director for East Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes has lamented, “By failing to share responsibility with Uganda, donor countries are failing to protect thousands of refugees’ lives; which is an obligation under international law.” (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Young Leaders Think Tank, 2017: 9).

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi has summed up the challenge facing Uganda especially with an increase in South Sudanese refugees: “We are at breaking point. Uganda cannot handle Africa’s largest refugee crisis alone. The lack of international attention to the suffering of the South Sudanese people is failing some of the most vulnerable people in the world when they most desperately need our help” (Government of Uganda and UNHCR, 2017).

Security and environmental burdens

Uganda also faces security and environmental burdens of hosting refugees. On security, refugees pose direct and indirect threats for the host countries. James Milner distinguishes between these direct and indirect threats. “First there are direct threats from ‘refugee warriors’ and armed exiles causing a ‘spill-over’ of conflict.... The direct threat, posed by the spill-over of conflict and refugee warriors, is by far the strongest link between forced migration and conflict. Secondly, there are indirect threat posed by refugees, through altering, either the levels of ‘grievance’ or the ‘opportunity structure’ in a country of asylum” (Milner, 2000: 17).

From Milner’s analysis, direct security threats come as a result of refugee warriors and armed exiles engaging in rebel and military activities on the territory of the host state. This brings in retaliation from the country of origin in attempts to neutralize the security threats posed by the armed refugee groups. This can lead to regionalization of conflicts.

Examples are the Rwandan invasion of Zaire in 1996 to

neutralize the Interahamwe and ex-FAR living in refugee camps and Burundi’s bombing of refugee camps in Western Tanzania to neutralize Hutu rebels. Uganda has experienced direct security threats as a result of refugees. In 1998, a Sudanese military Antonov aircraft bombed parts of Northern Uganda in trying to fight elements of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) living in refugee camps. In 2003, the Rwandan government threatened to attack Nakivale and Oruchinga settlements on allegations that rebels were training from there (Ahimbisibwe, 2016: 873). There were rumors of massive deployment on the border with Uganda, which was denied by Rwanda although it confirmed that it would defend its security interests (Human Rights First, 2004: 24).

Among indirect security threats are refugees’ involvement in crimes like theft, resource based conflicts, competition for employment with nationals among others (Milner, 2000). Among the notable causes of conflicts between refugees and host population is the competition for land. According to (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Young Leaders Think Tank, 2017: 6), “The quantity of land, a major source of livelihood for refugees and nationals alike, has remained the same, causing scarcity of resources and increased tension among host communities”.

Also, the host population in refugee hosting areas is suspicious that refugees are favored at the expense of the nationals. The World Bank notes that “in Nakivale and Rwamwanja refugee settlements, hostilities arose due to a suspicion that refugees were being favored by the government of Uganda at the expense of its citizens. In 2013, a settlement commandant was killed by members of the host population in Rwamwanja while reclaiming land from them to settle Congolese refugees” (World Bank, 2016: 29). Refugees and host populations have also accused each other of grazing on others’ land and destruction of crops by animals (World Bank Report, 2016: 29).

Furthermore, refugees have an impact on the environment in the host areas. Refugees depend on the environment for firewood, construction poles, cultivation and fishing in lakes, rivers and swamps. This leads to the abuse of the environment especially where refugee numbers outnumber the available resources (Whitaker, 2002). One of the impacts of refugees in settlements is the cutting down of trees (Ahimbisibwe, 2015: 301). This can be observed in Nakivale, Oruchinga and Rwamwanja settlements in South Western Uganda. There are also reports of overfishing in Lake Nakivale in Nakivale settlement (Ahimbisibwe, 2015: 301). Similar cases of environmental degradation by refugees have been reported in Northern and North Western Uganda (The Guardian, 2017).

It is hard to conclude that some challenges are more difficult than others since they are interrelated. This paper has argued that there is a link between these challenges and tackling these challenges is a source of hope in

regard to the protection of refugees in Uganda. For example, increasing number of refugees has increased refugees in protracted situations thus insufficient funding to refugees welfare due to overwhelming numbers and these have a diverse impact on environment as well as security. In addition, due to Uganda's open policy to refugees, it is difficult to control refugees. As long as the number of refugees remains high, mitigating these challenges might be challenging itself. However all hopes are not lost as the next section elucidates.

Opportunities for refugee protection

While a number of challenges exist, there are also positive developments allowing hope that refugee protection will improve in the coming years. Despite the reduction of the asylum space in the world today and challenges faced by asylum countries, Uganda has kept its borders open to many refugees fleeing persecution. This indicates that the country's resilience continues amidst the challenges. However, as already pointed out above, "this open door" policy to refugees can only survive if the international community is willing to shoulder its responsibilities and support developing countries that host millions of refugees as it is a case for Uganda, the third largest host state (UNHCR, 2018).

One of the measures would be burden sharing where the international community works closely with host states. Areas of cooperation can be supporting states in providing security to refugees through police training, facilitation of police in terms of allowances, strengthening the rule of law in refugee hosting areas, disarming and separating armed elements from genuine civilian refugees and maintaining the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum. There is need to address indirect security threats associated with refugees by promoting co-existence, harmony and good relations between refugees and local hosts. With the increasing xenophobia against refugees across the world, attention should be focused on working with states to make refugees more acceptable in the host communities. Such initiatives can include joint projects and sharing of resources and services like schools, health centers, water sources and roads. All these require sustainable funding that can be provided by donor countries and agencies.

The international community can also support host countries through the allocation of more resettlement quotas to refugees. With the increasing challenges of finding durable solutions to protracted refugee situations, Western countries need to provide more resettlement possibilities to refugees in the global south. This strategy can help in reducing the large numbers of refugees and also take them away from "the conflict theatre". Refugees normally start armed rebellion across borders in neighboring countries. Resettling them to Western countries can help prevent these armed conflicts.

Furthermore, for these positive developments to be

effective and take root, it is important to address the root causes of refugees and forced displacement. Most important is the need to work closely with countries of origin and address the root causes of exile. More effort should be put on peaceful resolution of conflicts, promotion of human rights, democratization, rule of law, support to civil society, building state institutions, reconciliation, promotion of development and the strategies for addressing poverty and income inequalities. These measures can help in resolving forced displacement and sustaining changes in the countries of origin to support the voluntary repatriation of refugees, which is the most durable solution.

The new refugee and host population empowerment framework (ReHoPE)

The Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) Strategic Framework is a transformative strategy and approach to bring together a wide range of stakeholders in a harmonized and cohesive manner to ensure more effective programming (Government of Uganda, United Nations and World Bank, 2017: vii). It is a response to specific challenges faced in delivering protection and achieving social and economic development for both refugee and host communities. It supports the Government of Uganda's integration of refugees into the National Development Plan II (NDPII, 2015/2016 to 2019/2020), through the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA), thereby making the refugees part and parcel of the national development agenda (Government of Uganda, United Nations and World Bank, 2017: vii).

ReHoPE is a key component in the application of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), as stipulated in the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants (19 September 2016). It is a key building block of a comprehensive response to displacement in Uganda, led by the Government of Uganda and the UN, in partnership with the World Bank, donors, development partners, national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, and the private sector, among others (Government of Uganda, United Nations and World Bank, 2017: vii).

ReHoPE offers an opportunity where refugees and host communities' needs will be addressed. As noted above, it is common to hear of complaints by host communities that government and humanitarian agencies focus more on the refugees. This has caused conflicts between refugees and their hosts. The ReHoPE framework puts the interests of local hosts at the center of refugee programming, planning and policy making. This opens the perspective that refugees' and local hosts' resilience and self-reliance will be strengthened in line with local and national development priorities. There is also hope that refugee-host relations will be improved and that refugees become more acceptable to the local hosts.

Kiranda et al. (2017: 12) argue that “through this initiative, host communities and refugees are envisaged to build strong social ties and create a better environment for economic engagement”. Gradually, surrounding districts where refugee settlements are located have started to witness improvements in public service delivery in sectors such as health and education for both the host communities and the refugees (Kiranda et al., 2017: 12). Overall, this is likely to facilitate refugee protection and integration in Uganda.

Progressive refugee regimes

Another opportunity is the fact that Uganda has progressive refugee policies and laws, in comparison to her neighbors and other African countries. Although Uganda’s refugee policies and laws are not without limitations, there is a consensus that the country is overall hospitable and open to refugees. The country has been praised worldwide, including the Pope during his visit to Uganda in November 2015 (Williams, 2015). Such international recognition of Uganda’s policies and efforts is an opportunity for refugees.

One of the strategies in the management of refugees is the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS). UNHCR defines self-reliance as the ability of an individual, household or community to depend (rely) on their own resources (physical, social and natural capital or assets), judgment and capabilities with minimal external assistance in meeting basic needs. It is understood to mean that refugees are able to provide for themselves, their household and community members in terms of food and other needs, including shelter, water, sanitation, health and education, and that they can cope with unexpected events, and are no longer dependent on outside assistance under normal circumstances (2004e: 64).

Dryden-Peterson and Hovil (2004: 29) note that “the SRS was jointly designed by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR Uganda in May 1999, the culmination of a process that officially began in 1998”. The SRS came as a result of the need to respond to the protracted nature of refugee situations in the late 1990s especially the Sudanese refugees in West Nile and Northern parts of Uganda. It was later extended to other refugee settlements.

The self-reliance strategy has been praised worldwide as one of the most progressive refugee policies. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2017: 2), “Uganda is praised for its progressive refugee hosting policy. Refugees in Uganda do not live in camps. Instead, they live in settlements and are provided plots of land for agricultural use to achieve self-reliance. This policy extends to all refugees, regardless of ethnicity or country of origin”.

However, this self-reliance strategy has been criticized. For example, Schiltz and Titeca (2017) argue that land given to refugees is too small to provide a decent living to the refugees and the local population still officially owns

them. As a result, refugees are constantly feeling uncertain about their future in Uganda. Despite some of the short comings of this strategy, it is still the best compared to the encampment policy of a number of countries where refugees are hosted in camps with several human rights restrictions.

Furthermore, Uganda’s refugee management is guided by the 2006 Refugees Act and the 2010 Refugee Regulations. These laws grant legal protection to refugees who are entitled to a number of rights that include the right to own property, freedom of movement and right to work. Other rights include right of association as regards non-political and non-profit making associations, right to access courts of law including legal assistance under the applicable laws of Uganda, rights of refugee children and of women refugees.

According to UNDP, “these rights and entitlements offer refugees a pathway to establish their own livelihoods and attain some level of self-reliance, thereby becoming progressively less reliant on humanitarian assistance” (United Nations Development Programme, 2017: 2).

The World Bank (2016: vii) shares the same view: “Uganda’s refugee laws are among the most progressive in the world. Refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to work; have freedom of movement; and can access Ugandan social services, such as health and education”.

This view has also been highlighted by another report. It is noted that, “Uganda’s progressive legal framework has other impressive aspects: (1) opening Uganda’s door to all asylum seekers irrespective of their nationality or ethnic affiliation; (2) granting refugees relative freedom of movement, administrative permits to leave and return to their designated settlements, and the right to seek employment; (3) providing prima facie asylum for refugees of certain nationalities; and (4) giving a piece of land to each refugee family for their own exclusive (agricultural) use” (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Young Leaders Think Tank, 2017: 9).

It has been argued elsewhere that although Uganda has progressive refugee policies and laws, there is a gap in practice. Not all refugees are treated in a manner consistent with the country’s obligations. For example, Rwandan refugees have faced restrictions in cultivation, reduction of food rations and forced repatriations. Their rights have been violated: rights to life, liberty and security of person, asylum and non-refoulement (Ahimbisibwe, 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b). These refugee laws and policies can only be an opportunity if Uganda respects them in theory and practice and treats refugees equally.

Refugee economy

For long, refugees have been looked at as a burden to host countries. All that is mentioned is how refugees are economic, environmental, security and diplomatic burdens. However, this view neglects the contribution that refugees make to host communities. It is this

contribution that should be seen as an opportunity by host countries.

According to Jacobsen (2002: 577), “while refugees impose a variety of security, economic and environmental burdens on host countries, they also embody a significant flow of resources in the form of international humanitarian assistance, economic assets and human capital”. Jacobsen further argues that “these material, social and political resources, which she calls ‘refugee resources’, potentially represent an important state building contribution to the host state. Refugee resources may help develop areas of the country, increase the welfare of citizens and extend the bureaucratic reach of the state” (Jacobsen, 2002: 578).

Jacobsen reminds us that “refugees themselves bring human capital in the form of labor, skills and entrepreneurship and they are conduits of remittance flows” (Jacobsen, 2002: 578). This is similar to what Whitaker found in Tanzania, namely that “refugees also represented a source of cheap labor for Tanzanian villages. Local farmers generally hired refugees to do agricultural work, but also to build houses, tend to livestock and fetch water or firewood. Wages varied depending on the distance from the camps and the type of work. Nearly three-quarters of the time, refugees were paid with food instead of money” (Whitaker, 2002: 341).

According to Betts et al. (2017), “Evidence in the refugee settlements suggests that refugees are innovative and enterprising. They have skills, talents and aspirations”. In fact refugees make a contribution to the Ugandan economy. “One of the most visible ways in which refugees directly contribute to the Ugandan host economy is by exercising their purchasing power. Refugees are regular customers of Ugandan businesses both in Kampala and the settlement areas” (Betts et al., 2014: 16).

It has been argued elsewhere that refugees own hotels, bars, shops which are used by both refugees and host population. Refugees apart from providing manual labor, they also employ Ugandans in Nakivale settlement. There was evidence that refugees contributed to the local economy of Nakivale settlement, Isingiro district and the neighboring areas (Ahimbisibwe, 2015). This also takes place in other refugee settlements in Uganda. Betts et al. (2014) argue that host countries need to tap into the talents, skills and resources of refugees. Refugees are an opportunity to host countries. Rather than assuming a need for indefinite care and maintenance, interventions should nurture such refugee capacities. This is likely to involve improved opportunities for education, skills development, access to microcredit and financial markets, business incubation, and improved internet access, for example.

Engagement with donors

Another positive development is Uganda’s engagement

with donors to support refugees. As mentioned above, the country organized the refugee solidarity summit in June 2017 aimed at raising 2 Billion US Dollars. Although only \$358 million was mobilized leaving a big deficit, the summit has provided a foundation for more engagement with donors. Uganda has been able to raise the issue of refugees at the international level. Such summits are necessary as a resource mobilization strategy under the principle of burden sharing.

It is important to note that developing countries host more than 80% of the world’s refugees. This burden cannot be met only by the countries in the south. The rich countries in the north need to meet their obligations and provide support to refugees. Uganda has received support from among others, United States, Germany, Japan, Belgium, the European Union, Denmark, Norway, France, Italy and the United Kingdom. Such support is a positive sign of burden sharing if Uganda is to sustainably host and manage refugees. More donor support is required to cater for the increasing number of refugees.

Role of civil society

Refugee protection is not a state or UNHCR issue alone. Refugee protection requires a combined effort of all the stakeholders including civil society. The NGOs, Community Based Organizations, the churches, media, professional bodies, the business community among others have a responsibility in supporting refugees. Civil society can mobilize resources to support government and UNHCR efforts, raise awareness about the plight of refugees, engage in advocacy and speak on behalf of the voiceless refugees.

In Uganda, civil society’s role in refugee affairs continues to grow. For example, NGOs have interventions, programmes and projects in refugee settlements. A number of NGOs are implementing partners of UNHCR in the refugee settlements where they assist in providing assistance and services to the refugees.

The churches are one of the actors with potential to assist refugees. For example it was reported in the New Vision of 6th March 2018 that the Seventh Day Adventist Church was fundraising for Congolese refugees in Uganda (Mubiru, 2018). The Catholic and Anglicans churches have also mobilized support for refugees. Caritas and Catholic relief services are both organizations of the Catholic Church that have provided humanitarian assistance to refugees in Uganda. The churches have also urged their followers to welcome refugees especially in the refugee hosting areas.

These messages by religious leaders are encouraging and make refugees feel welcome. Since churches have influence on their followers, they have the potential of improving refugee-host relations.

In addition, the media in Uganda has been instrumental

in reporting and writing about refugees. For example, the New Vision and Daily Monitor newspapers have been consistently writing stories and editorials on refugees. The television stations like NTV, NBS, and UBC also report and hold talk shows on refugees. This is a positive development since it sensitizes host communities about refugees, their rights, protection and the country's obligations.

The business community has started supporting refugees. For example, in January 2018, MTN, a telecommunication company has given 1 billion Uganda shillings to the government to support refugees. HAI Agency Uganda Limited in collaboration with development partners and support from Ugandan government have championed a national multi-stakeholder humanitarian campaign dubbed 'Run for Refugees' (R4R) aimed at rallying countrywide local humanitarian support to complement government and development partner efforts to provide for the needs of refugees and hosting communities (Mulemba, 2018). The Run for Refugees and host communities 2018 will involve two marathons starting with Arua on 20th May for the West Nile humanitarian group and 10th June for Kampala (Mulemba, 2018). A number of businesses companies have supported this fundraising drive. There is a potential for the business community to support refugee operations in Uganda.

Much as this paper recognizes the opportunities in existence in Uganda to spur refugee protection and integration, the burden still remains on refugee welfare as local hosts expect to benefit from humanitarian support given to the refugees. This is the only way refugees can co-exist with the host communities. The opportunities discussed above have been tested in other areas and sectors as well. For example, MTN has organized and participated in several marathons including to support the health sector in Uganda for example in November 2018, MTN organized a marathon to combat exposure of school going children to cancer from asbestos and improving maternal health at Kiswa and Komambogo health centres (Gahene 2017)

Over the last 13 years, the telecom company has supported causes like improving sanitation in Kampala, providing water facilities to the Karamoja sub-region and provision of "mama" delivery kits in Northern Uganda through marathons (<https://pctechmag.com/2017/11/the-14th-annual-mtn-kampala-marathon-raised-600-million-ugx-towards-charity/>).

Conclusion

This article has argued that although Uganda has been praised as a generous country with progressive refugee policies and laws that reflect the country's national, regional and international obligations, a number of challenges ranging from increasing refugee numbers, protracted refugee situations, limited resources and little

international support threaten its hospitality to refugees. However, despite the challenges, there are some emerging opportunities which if seized could provide effective protection to the refugees.

The insights in this article have policy implications. There is need to understand why Uganda continues to be an open and hospitable country to refugees despite the various challenges. A country like Tanzania used to be an open country to refugees but has since changed and adopted restrictive asylum policies (Milner, 2013). One would expect Uganda to behave the same way and adopt less welcoming refugee policies. This however has not happened. Apart from countries in the south, the asylum space continues to narrow in the developed countries. Developed countries that have resources have adopted policies that restrict entry, stay and protection of refugees. Insights from Uganda would help us understand its resilience and commitment towards refugees. This would offer some lessons to other refugee hosting countries on how to adopt "open door" refugee policies.

Lastly, policy makers at the international and regional levels need to engage with countries of origin and assist them in addressing the root causes of forced displacement. In most cases, conflicts are the leading cause of refugees. South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi have been and are major refugees generating countries in the region. Although a number of actors have been engaged in the search for peace in these countries, more efforts are needed to achieve sustainable and durable peace. There is need to invest in conflict prevention and resolution. It is important to support peace building efforts in conflict affected countries. Where necessary, sanctions and other punitive measures should be put on parties fueling conflicts. In combination, all these strategies will help in addressing the burden of refugees in host countries.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interest

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