

1-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Aleesi, Brenda (2021) "Education and Peaceful Coexistence among Urban Refugee Children," *Young African Leaders Journal of Development*: Vol. 3 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/yaljod/vol3/iss1/21>

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EDUCATION AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE AMONG URBAN REFUGEE CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Education is a salient aspect of the peaceful coexistence of any society that cannot be ignored. This paper examines the role of education in aiding the peaceful coexistence of urban refugees in Uganda. Uganda continues to host refugees fleeing conflict, war and instability from countries in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. Refugees are given basic assistance in rural settlements. Urban refugees who choose to live in the urban areas amongst the host community do not receive basic assistance except a few on the urban caseload (with security and health problems).

The information is drawn from qualitative research data on urban refugees and related literature. Urban refugees face multiple challenges, for instance, inadequate education, health care and language barrier among others. Refugees in Kampala despite the firsthand experience of violent conflict have found ways to peacefully coexist with surrounding communities. Focus is on urban refugee children of Congolese origin who constitute the largest number of refugee living in Kampala. Education has facilitated peaceful coexistence through completing the socialization process, imparting values, attitudes and transforming the behaviour of urban refugee children.

Peaceful coexistence happens when people who are distinct from each other in terms of language, ethnicity and culture find ways to accept their differences, live together while resolving conflict non-violently. Education and peaceful coexistence are good factors worth considering when working towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: *Education, Peaceful coexistence, Refugees*

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the role of education as an instrument of peaceful coexistence among urban refugees living in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. The role of education looks at formal education in mainstream schools, provided by refugee NGOs to help the refugees fit in their new environment and formal education provided by the urban refugees for their children who do not have the opportunity to attend school. It further addresses the ways education promote peaceful coexistence.

This study focused on urban refugees because unlike other refugees who live in rural settlements and receive basic assistance on arrival, Urban refugees don't receive basic assistance except for refugees on the urban caseload (faced with security and health problems). Refugees living in urban areas like Kampala have to fend for their families and become self-reliant. Urban refugees do face challenges. For example, inadequate access to education and health care, language barrier, shelter, clothing and food are the major challenges. This study is particularly relevant because it covers education initiatives developed by the urban refugees despite their challenges and the present enormous refugee flows from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Urban refugees from DRC are the focus of this study.

According to UNHCR 2017 report, Uganda hosts an estimated 1.3 million refugees. It has the largest number of refugees in Africa and is among the top five in the world. Armed conflict and political turmoil are responsible for the millions of refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, across the world. By the end of 2017, 240,000 Congolese refugees found themselves under the protection of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Uganda. Nearly 55 per cent of the Congolese refugees are



under 18, many crossing borders unaccompanied or separated and of which only 46% have access to education. Many refugees live in rural settlements while those who choose to live in urban areas like Kampala can access government services with the rest of the host community. Uganda has traditionally been attractive for refugees fleeing instability across the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa region because of its liberal immigration policy.

The refugee population in Kampala consists of Rwandans and Congolese from earlier decades. The urban refugee population is classified into refugees on the urban caseload (with security and health problems), asylum seekers, refugees in transit, refugees seeking resettlement in a third country and unregistered self-settled refugees (Macchiavello,2003:3).

BACKGROUND

Urban refugee children are vulnerable both as children and refugees and face several challenges that affect their education. Many refugee children in Kampala are not able to access education in urban areas despite the universal primary education programme that subsidizes the cost of education. As earlier stated, refugee assistance is given to refugees in rural settlements and urban refugees are expected to be self-reliant. Urban refugees still struggle to make ends meet and their children face inadequate education because they cannot afford the scholastic materials required at school among others (Dryden-Peterson,2003:20). Urban refugee children from Francophone countries face a language barrier in Kampala where English is the language of instruction in schools. Furthermore, urban refugee children suffer psychological trauma as a result of the refugee experience which hinders their initial settlement in school. For instance, a refugee counsellor narrated how a refugee boy of Congolese origin is withdrawn and quiet and when questioned breaks down in tears. A teacher in school that has a substantial number of refugee children described them as hostile, tending to fight all the time. These psychological problems among urban refugee children once addressed through therapy coupled with education facilitate peaceful coexistence within the host community.

Education is defined as those experiences that train, discipline and shape the mental and physical potentials on the maturing person. (Ferrante 2003:448). Education serves as a means to empower children and adults through knowledge and skills to become active participants in the transformation of their societies. This learning places emphasis on the values, attitudes and behaviours which enable individuals peacefully coexist in diverse societies. Education takes place in different settings. For example, informal education occurs spontaneously and is unplanned while a formal education is planned and intended to impart skills and a way of thinking.

This paper is concerned with formal education-schooling that occurs in mainstream schools, refugee NGOs and refugee initiated programs for their children and its function in the peaceful coexistence of urban refugee children within host communities (Uganda). Peaceful coexistence occurs when people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, races and languages accept their differences and choose to resolve conflict non-violently. Urban refugees encounter cultures different from their own within the Kampala. As a result of the interactions and engagement, misunderstandings and tension is bound to erupt inadvertently. However, the benefit of education through behaviour change facilitates the peaceful coexistence of urban refugee children. The role of education is drawn from the values, behaviour and attitudes instilled in the urban refugee children through the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

The functionalist theory of education asserts that education functions to serve the needs of society. Peaceful coexistence is pivotal in the continuity and development of any society and will vary from one society to another. To be specific, formal establishments like schools exist to teach refugee children the skills they need to adapt to their environment. Alternatively, education serves a liberating experience that releases refugee children from the blinders imposed by the accident of birth into a particular country, culture and family (Ferrante, 2003:448). Education plays a great role in the peaceful coexistence of urban refugees in Uganda in many ways.



THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Socialization starts at birth and continues into adulthood. Education has helped complete the socialization process among urban refugee children. According to Ferrante, Socialization is a process through which individuals develop their human capacities and acquire a unique personality and character by which culture is passed from one generation to another (Ferrante, 2003:106). The family cannot take on this role solely without the help of education and other institutions in binding and transferring the norms, values, beliefs and language needed to peacefully coexist in the larger community.

Urban refugee children live in diverse environments characterized by socio-economic inequality which hinder effective peaceful coexistence. Education plays a significant role in ensuring equality of opportunities for members of society across the divide including people of concern. Education promotes gender equality through diffusing prejudices and ideas that the refugee children have picked up in their families and communities back in the country of origin or within host communities. Refugee children who attend school have the opportunity of receiving an education together with members of the host community. The Convention against Discrimination in Education affirms this issue.

Education promoted coexistence among urban refugee children through communicating values that unite different sections of the communities. The family as a basic unit of any society may not impart all the values in the refugee child but education as an institution incorporates all the values of the wider society thus promoting peaceful coexistence. Values include obedience, fair play, cooperation, acceptance and tolerance. Education has prepared refugee children for future employment by giving them skills that will enable them to earn a living as any ordinary member of society. Education has empowered urban refugee children with skills and knowledge that helped them to be useful in society. For one to peacefully coexist, they need to make a living to be in a position that meets their basic needs through the God-given talents and skills attained through education.

Education has promoted self-empowerment among urban refugee children amidst the challenges and given them a positive outlook towards life. The Speak your Rights Curriculum at the Refugee Law Project, for instance, has given refugee children knowledge and awareness of the rules and regulations within the host community and their inherent human rights as human beings; a right direction towards peaceful coexistence. It's through education that urban refugee children can obtain human rights awareness and training.

Education provides language training opportunities for urban refugee children from francophone countries, for instance, the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo), to learn the languages spoken in the host community. Language is a vital aspect of communication because, when individuals listen and understand each other, then it's easier for meaningful interactions to occur and possibly resolution of conflict. Knowledge of a language aids the accessibility of education, health care, employment, later integration and the absence of a shared language with the host community puts one at a minimal disadvantage in everyday life. The Refugee Law Project, a local refugee NGO, through the English literacy class provided language classes for urban refugees. Literacy allows the participation of urban refugees in the activities of the host community. Urban refugee children do acquire language training through school attendance and the curriculum of the school.

Education has built resilience by providing a sense of stability among urban refugee children. Resilience is the ability to bounce back or recover after some negative event. Urban refugees have started schools to help their children who cannot afford school fees in governments schools cope with the challenges. Young African Refugees for Integral Development started such a school that provides peace education and learning for urban refugee children whose formal education has been jeopardized by the overwhelming adversities of conflict and war they have faced. Education achieves resilience in refugee children through building self-esteem and confidence inadvertently helping them over the effects of the adversities they have faced (Hart et al, 2007:84).

Education processes provided the best avenue for instilling values attributed to a culture of peace among refugee children thus peaceful coexistence. The 1990 world declaration on Education for all (Jomtien Declaration) states;



Basic Learning needs comprises not only essential tools such as literacy and numeracy but also knowledge, skills, attitudes and values required to live and work in dignity and to participate in development. It further states that the satisfaction of those needs implies a responsibility to promote social justice, acceptance of differences and peace. (World Declaration on Education for All, 1990 Article 1(1)).

Education activities like sports and physical education require refugee children to play and cooperate with children from different nationalities whilst encouraging positive attitudes. These education activities impart attitudes like showing respect for your opponent, recognizing perceived justice and values opposed to your own, believing in forgiveness and tolerance of those different from you (Chopra, 2005:191). Sports is indeed one way to reach refugee children who face educational challenges by offering them a sense of belonging and friendship (UNICEF200 4:1). Friendships and other relationships are easily made over a game of football and team building promoted through sports.

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