Riding on the back of a tortoise

Abebe Feyissa Demo

An Ethiopian community responds to protracted displacement.

My name is Abebe Feyissa Demo and I was born in Addis Ababa in 1960. Before I had to leave my homeland, I was studying in the University of Addis Ababa's Department of Psychology. In 1991 I fled to escape the brutal torture of student leaders such as myself. In 1993 I was relocated from Walda refugee camp to Kakuma refugee camp. I have lived here ever since. I am actively involved in my community, and also have worked for many years for the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Kakuma. My current role for JRS is Community Counselling Focal Person, which involves both counselling those in my community and training others in counselling skills and massage.

Kakuma refugee camp, located in north-west Kenya, was originally established for 12,000 Sudanese minors who arrived in 1992. Since that time they have been joined by refugees of other nationalities. Kakuma now holds 70,000 refugees. As well as thousands more Sudanese there are refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. Many have been living in Kakuma for more than ten years. Those who came as children have been educated and have grown to adulthood in Kakuma; many children have been born in the camp and have never seen their 'home' countries. Since 2006, large numbers of Sudanese refugees have returned home but many, especially the women and children, are not yet ready to leave Kakuma.

Most of the Ethiopian refugees now living in the camp were students in higher education institutions or skilled professionals from cities and towns in Ethiopia. Most were single, and between the ages of 18 and 35. There were more men than women. Those who fled in 1991 – as I did – stayed initially in Walda refugee camp but at the beginning of 1993 this entire group of Ethiopian refugees was relocated to Kakuma refugee camp, where many of them still live today.

The opportunities for refugees in Kakuma to improve their lives are limited. Kenyan government policy dictates that refugees must stay in one of two camps (Kakuma or Dadaab). Refugees are not allowed to keep animals, since this is considered likely to increase conflict between the refugees and the local Turkana people, and the semi-arid environment is not conducive to growing crops. It is possible for refugees to start small businesses, if the capital is available (either through a loan from an NGO or money sent by family abroad). However, the market is finite because Kakuma is in a very isolated area – its name means 'nowhere' in Swahili – and the majority of customers are other refugees, a small number of NGO staff and local Kenyans. All NGOs in the camp 'employ' refugees but due to Kenyan laws prohibiting employment of refugees, they are engaged on a voluntary basis and then paid an 'incentive', which is far lower than a wage would be for a Kenyan in an equivalent job.

"Each day of the week falls on Sunday" was a saying of Zemede Bezabih, a fellow refugee, when he explains the day-to-day life of refugees in Kakuma refugee camp. With no work, all the days of the week are the same, except in name. The only concern of refugees is now and then hiding themselves from the scorching sun and the dust-storms. Once or twice a day they cook inside their shelters made of plastic sheeting, every day, every week and every month, every year, maybe forever. When Sunday happens more than just once a week, it becomes a cursed day.

All the refugees want to escape this unhealthy situation. They do not know what to do about it and, more frustratingly, they do not know whether it will ever come to an end. UNHCR's three durable solutions are voluntary repatriation, integration of refugees into the social structure of the host country, or resettlement in a third country. However, none of these options seem to be available to the Ethiopians in Kakuma.

Impact on behaviour

For so many years refugees were spending seven Sundays in a week without any meaningful activity. At the same time they were excited with longing and dreams of a better life tomorrow. Every refugee used to dream his or her tomorrow but had no power to make it come true.

Refugees were like a vehicle whose brake and accelerator were engaged at the same time: much roaring and agitation but no forward movement. Eventual engine break-down is the result. And as time slowly went by, refugees began behaving differently. They fell prey to illnesses. Personal hygiene became too much effort. No-one bothered much to take meals.

During the dust-storms that blow at the beginning of those never-ending days, it was common to see refugees running up and down, here and there, to hide themselves from the dust – despite the fact that there is nowhere better to go. It is as if the running itself is helpful.

Refugees run here and there, trying everything they can think of to find a solution to their problems and a way out of their refugee life. Despite this endless activity, their progress forward is painfully slow. We call it 'riding on the back of a tortoise'. People are ready and willing to make every effort to ride away from their problems but the only animal available to them is a tortoise, so the rider makes very little progress despite their efforts. After years of this, there are some who resign completely, come down from the back of the tortoise and hang themselves on an acacia tree.

How do some refugees cope better than others?

Refugees working as counsellors and social workers for NGOs active in the camp recognised the

difficulty, and frequently discussed possible alternative interventions. They were not professional helpers as such. The concern they had for their fellow refugees was more out of sense of communal responsibility than professional duty.

They noted that there were some refugees who seemed to cope better than others. It was common to find many refugees gambling behind closed doors, often for many hours at a time. Strangely enough, they were less anxious than others about the refugee life that seems to have no end. The hours passed quickly for them. Some other young refugees used to spend time playing and listening to *kirar* (a traditional Ethiopian stringed instrument). It was common to see on their faces a rested look.

A youth group performs a traditional Sudanese dance as part of a Youth Festival, Kakuma refugee camp.

UNHCR/A Webster

At that time, it was a frequent experience to hear at night-time the cry of *"Leba, leba!" (Thief, thief!)* Sudanese refugee minors (the 'Lost Boys' now resettled in the US) used to raid the Ethiopian community at night. Everybody chased the thieves in the pitch darkness but those Sudanese minors were rarely caught. What amazed us were the reactions of those who had been chasing the thieves. When they returned, they would gather in small groups to exchange experiences: the one who caught the neck of his neighbour, mistaking him for a thief; the one who couldn't find the door of his own house to go out to join the chase; the one who banged into a tree or who fell into a pit and bruised his leg. Everyone talks without properly listening to each other, just talks with a feeling of liveliness and a satisfaction. The one wounded while running after the thieves talks about his freshly bleeding wound without ever feeling the pain. Sometimes these exchanges of experiences last long into the night. And the next morning many say that they slept well and their faces show they were more rested than usual.

Those of us who are counsellors and social workers used to regularly discuss those experiences and incidents. What interested us was not the experience itself but the effect it had on refugees. We wanted to understand what it was about the experience that brought pleasure and a feeling of well-being.

Let's take the example of the gamblers. Yes, gamblers are not good role models but their behaviour seems to bring them some benefits. They have something to look forward to – wining the next game. In contrast, most other refugees have nothing to look forward to.

We thought about those refugees who go out at night shouting "leba, leba" and running after thieves. They returned without catching the thieves, without retrieving the stolen goods, sometimes wounded, bruised and swollen, but they would chat for hours with unaccustomed vitality. Why was that? What was the reason for the sound sleep and rested face they showed the next morning?

We concluded that pleasure and satisfaction in life is to be found in having something to look forward to and in free release of physical energy towards a meaningful goal.

Development of community activities

Based on this belief we decided to find ways to help our fellow refugees.

Kakuma refugee camp

UNHCR/A Webster

We focused first on the youngsters. It was they who were much affected by this unending refugee life. Ex-students of higher education and young skilled professionals with ambitions were watching idly as the prime of their lives passed them by. Our aim became to engage these refugees in activities that were meaningful to them. For example, we planned plays and music festivals that provided food for

Member of a women's group crocheting, Kakuma camp

thought and that enabled refugees to reflect on their refugee life and even gave them the opportunity to laugh at their misfortunes.

One member of our community was working for one of the NGOs in the camp but back home he had been a well-known football player. He quickly managed to form two teams of young refugees and, after a few more weeks of training, a match between the two teams was scheduled and all were invited to watch. On the day of the match, the number of refugees who gathered to watch the game was spectacular. They walked three kilometres to the football pitch and watched the game with a spirit of liveliness as they were waiting eagerly to see the team they supported win.

Returning to the camp, most refugees were walking erect and head up, talking more loudly and smiling more frequently to one another. Since then, refugees have come not only to watch matches but also to participate in regular training sessions. Eventually many young refugees formed a number of football teams, each with their own team name. The sports activities that started in the Ethiopian refugee community spread to other refugee communities – Sudanese, Somali and Congolese. Inter-community sports matches were held.

Refugees who were followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox church decided to mobilise refugees to build a church large enough to accommodate everyone. Within two years, with financial support from abroad, refugees built two sparkling churches. Youngsters and many older people were more than willing and ready to help build the church. Church activities and the number of church-goers grew each day. More importantly, refugees who dedicated their time and energy to this work found that they had bigger appetites for whatever food was available and greater reserves of physical energy. They felt pleasantly tired after their work and slept deeply at night. They were completely changed persons.

An ex-student of Addis Ababa University theatrical arts department volunteered to write, direct and produce plays suitable for refugees of all ages. One morning, colourful hand-written posters with an invitation to a play appeared in many places in the camp. It was a talking point for all, and triggered a sense of eagerness and excitement. Many must have sensed a feeling of going to one of the theatres they used to frequent back home. Life was continuing.

Refugees had the chance of watching plays at least once every two months. Just after the show the talk of the week would be about it, not about the pain of refugee life. Refugees had something to look forward to.

Building a church and watching drama were not ends in themselves; rather they formed a springboard to something more important and meaningful. The opportunity to release energy was at last found. Refugees were feeling better.

Within a few years, refugees in Kakuma camp set up bars and restaurants, shops and other service-providing businesses. Internet cafes, video shows, table tennis, pool and many other indoor games, barbers and hair salons mushroomed.

Once they regained a sense of pride and purpose, refugees developed the desire to decorate their homes. Competition soon started between refugees in decorating homes, planting trees and flowers around their compound. Refugees who had never seen the possibility of true living in the camp got married and had children. Now their children are in school and there are reasons and meaning to continuing life in the camp – to not wanting to die.

Conclusion

All refugees need a sense of security to function well. Life in the shadow of fear is debilitating and corrosive to the soul. That is what they fled from. They also need to have purposeful activities that are as meaningful as those back home. It does not mean that refugees should have all the material possessions they had back home. However, they need to function with the feeling of being at home.

Most often, it is neighbouring countries that can provide refuge for people fleeing. Host countries and NGOs serving refugees should not conclude that providing refugees with food rations – though this provision is crucial – and making sure that they are safe from danger are enough.

In addition to their basic needs, refugees must have meaningful activity, choices, some control over their lives. Very often these do not need to be provided by agencies. As Ethiopians have demonstrated in Kakuma, refugee communities are quite capable of organising themselves and supporting their members, if they are given the opportunity. It is a challenge to find meaning in life when more than 15 years have been spent in camps. While refugee communities in protracted displacement situations are able to develop resources and find ways to cope, in the end a more permanent solution to their problems must be found.

Abebe Feyissa Demo has recently been resettled in Australia. *The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Rebecca Horn (RHorn@qmu.ac.uk), Research Fellow at the Institute of International Health and Development, Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, in writing this paper.*