

Peacebuilding in displacement

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Despite their knowledge and experience, and their vested interest in resolving conflicts in their countries, refugees are not yet being fully engaged as peace advocates.

Opportunities to tap the potential contribution of refugees as key stakeholders in peace processes include:

- developing participatory mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of civil society in peace talks
- honing mediation skills to channel refugees' knowledge and interests into peace talks
- strengthening capacities to enable refugees to contribute more effectively to the social and economic recovery of their country.

Calls for the involvement of refugees in peace processes have been clearly made in recent years. Goal 5 of UNHCR's Agenda for Protection – 'Redoubling the search for durable solutions'¹ – specifically encourages states "to facilitate the participation of refugees, including women, in peace and reconciliation processes to ensure that such agreements duly recognise the right to return and contemplate measures to encourage repatriation, reintegration and reconciliation."

Peace talks

Engaging refugees in peace talks can strengthen the peacebuilding

process in two key ways. First, refugees can contribute to the development of peace agreements that more comprehensively address the causes and consequences of conflicts. Second, they can assist in implementing agreements. Yet their inclusion is far from being an established norm of peace making.

Admittedly, broadened participation, unless carefully designed, can render negotiations extremely challenging, if not unworkable. Civil society groups may be politicised and fragmented and the range of issues they put on the table can also become difficult to manage. Nonetheless, these concerns

can be addressed and, in the process, prospects for peace can be increased.

For example, Burundian refugees, with the support of UNHCR in identifying representatives and facilitating travel, participated in the Arusha Peace Process consultations through two mechanisms which channelled refugees' interests into the official talks through a presentation to a formal committee dealing with refugee issues, set up as part of the negotiations, and through participation in a UNIFEM-sponsored conference that provided female delegates at the official talks with a list of recommendations.

Issues tabled by refugees, and ultimately reflected in the peace agreement, included the recovery of land and property, and measures to guarantee the voluntary and safe return and reintegration of refugees into Burundian society.

Liberian civil society, after years of substantial lobbying, formally participated in the 2003 peace negotiations with backing from grassroots organisations which included refugees. Their participation supported the inclusion of members of civil society in the transitional government, counterbalancing the



An episode of a UNHCR-produced soap opera promoting tolerance in Côte d'Ivoire won the Audience Award at the 7th Abidjan FICA film festival (Festival international du court métrage d'Abidjan) in the short features category. Directed by young Rwandan refugee Joseph Mouganga.

representation of the fighting factions, and also contributed to provisions concerning transitional justice such as the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Such engagement can provide momentum for ongoing involvement by civil society in support of peacebuilding. Indeed, critical steps have been taken in this direction in both countries. In Burundi, civil society has been active in the activities of the Peace Building Commission and in Liberia a group of Liberian civil society actors drafted the legislation for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in essence leading the process.

Conversely, overlooking refugees' interests can be extremely detrimental to peace processes. Since the failure of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA)², when displaced populations were neither officially represented at the negotiating table nor consulted, current negotiations have recognised the need for inclusive talks. Refugees in Chad have already been consulted and have shared their concerns on issues related to security, assessment of root causes, compensation demands and native administration.

There is also a real risk that neglected and protracted situations, where refugees have little or no scope to contribute to efforts to resolve their plight, may provide fertile ground for those who would seek to persuade refugees to take up arms. Tackling the recruitment of adults and children by armed groups is a common challenge in refugee settlements.

Peacebuilding in exile

Some 98% of refugees in sub-Saharan Africa – which hosts approximately a quarter of the world's refugees – spend more than five years in exile. This time can be used to foster knowledge, attitudes and skills critical to future peacebuilding. The lack of opportunities to keep up education and skills during protracted displacement can be very disempowering. Formal education and vocational training programmes can be critical in ensuring that the home country has a future educated generation, particularly when refugees spend decades in exile. The involvement too of refugees in designing and

delivering humanitarian assistance programmes helps to hone community organisational skills.

When refugees return home, these skills can help them also in supporting reconciliation processes.



Joseph Mouganga fled Rwanda in 1994 to Côte d'Ivoire. On winning the FICA Audience Award, he said: "I am a refugee and refugees have won this prize through me. When refugees win such a prize, it means that we are loved by the host population. I want to pay tribute to them."

In Lumbala N'Guimbo, a community in Angola divided for decades by war, a women's association helped to rebuild community relationships by enabling those returning from exile abroad and from internal displacement to share the sewing, literacy and craft skills they had developed while displaced. In addition, former refugee women were able to draw upon the management experience they had gained in women's groups to help them run the association.

Weaknesses within the social fabric of a displaced community can compound over long periods of displacement. Addressing them can bring significant benefits both in countries of asylum and after return. Such situations can be approached in a variety of ways. One of these is through the Peace Education Programme (PEP)³ developed by UNHCR and the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies which fosters critical conflict mediation skills based on the idea that everyone is responsible for peace. PEP consists of training modules for inclusion in formal education programmes, as well as

community projects targeting adults and out-of-school youths. Graduates of the programme have spearheaded a number of peace activities that have promoted peace, minimised conflicts within and between communities, and empowered women. One Liberian returnee graduate is currently facilitating peace education training as part of a community empowerment project in the main areas of Liberia where people have been returning after many years away.

A refugee soap opera provides an example of the skills of refugees and the use of media to promote tolerance. In 2003 UNHCR and some refugees launched a campaign in response to growing tensions in Côte d'Ivoire. Twelve episodes of the soap opera, 'Résidence Akwaba', directed by a Rwandan refugee, depicted the realities of daily life, including joys and challenges in the interactions between refugees and the local population.

Recommendations

Constructive use of time spent in prolonged exile means that the returning refugee population is better equipped to rebuild an economy, reconcile with former community members and mediate conflicts during what are likely to be fragile recovery and reintegration processes.

As the international community debates how to build sustainable peace, full recognition should be given to refugees as key stakeholders, who can and should play a determining role in peace. The UN Security Council should adopt a Resolution that will call for broader civil society engagement, including that of refugees. It is also important in these debates to define peacebuilding in an inclusive way which recognises peacebuilding beginning as soon as conflict surfaces.

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1. <http://tinyurl.com/UNHCRAgProt>

2. <http://allafrica.com/peaceafrica/resources/view/00010926.pdf>

3. <http://www.ineeserver.org/page.asp?pid=1062>