

Clarifying local integration

by Sarah Meyer

Ana Low's article in FMR 25¹ highlights the need to re-examine and re-invigorate debate on local integration as a durable solution for refugees. However, the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) in Uganda which she describes does not provide an adequate model of local integration as a durable solution – in fact, local integration is not its aim.

Renewed academic and policy focus on local integration is reflected in the recent UNHCR Executive Committee statement on Local Integration and Self-Reliance (UNHCR, 2005).² Crisp is clear that “local integration can be regarded as a process which leads to a durable solution for refugees.” While Crisp argues that this process may not necessitate naturalisation, he maintains that “the notion of local integration is based on the assumption that refugees will remain indefinitely in their country of asylum and find a solution to their plight in that state”, sharply distinguishing this approach from local settlement and self-reliance, which does not imply permanent asylum of any form.³ This is echoed in such policy documents as the UNHCR Global Consultations paper on Local Integration (UNHCR, 2002). They highlight the differences

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between self-reliance – as a potential precursor to local integration, or an element of de facto local integration – and local integration as a durable solution. There needs to be a clear distinction made between de facto local integration in contexts where host governments still clearly prioritise repatriation – as is the case in Uganda – and cases where full local integration is accepted as a durable solution.

However, Ana Low's analysis conflates self-reliance and local integration. This confusion was also evident in UNHCR's 1997 *State of the World's Refugees*, which stated that

Uganda's self-reliance policies were based on “the aim of facilitating their long-term integration.” Yet Uganda's refugee policy prioritises repatriation as the preferred durable solution.

In interviews conducted in Kampala and Arua Government of Uganda (GoU) officials were quick to clarify that, despite utilisation of the term ‘integration’ in policy documents, the preferred durable solution is still repatriation. Their Commissioner for Refugees stated in 2005 that “we still think that the best solution to the problem of refugees is return; we still emphasise that in our policies.” Indeed, GoU officials express concern that the SRS be interpreted not as accepting ongoing refugee presence but rather as initiating a developmental process to mitigate the negative impact that refugee-hosting is perceived to have had in refugee-hosting areas in Uganda. Promotion of self-reliance is clearly an interim measure in the context of an over-arching commitment to repatriation as a durable solution.

Ana Low's article further argues that in Uganda the “Local Governments Act encouraged participatory decision making and led to the establishment of Refugee Welfare Councils to identify and respond to development needs of refugees.” Yet many of the shortcomings of the SRS resulted precisely because the overall decentralisation process in Uganda has not seen a parallel devolution of control of refugee policy or functions. There has been, in fact, a concomitant process of re-centralisation of control and power over refugee issues.

The responsibility for refugee policy and programmes was transferred from the Ministry of Local Government to the Office of the

Prime Minister (OPM) in 1998 within which the Ministry of Disasters and Emergency Preparedness was established, with refugee policy as a central focal point. The placing of control over refugee affairs in OPM ensures administrative, political and social separation of refugees and refugee-related issues from district planning and political processes. District development planning processes do not include refugees. The Arua District Planner reflected, “I am not aware of any consultations going on with refugees.” The Refugee Welfare Council system is explicitly confined to the refugee settlements, with access to the district planning process dependent on the OPM representative (the camp commandant) who may take the refugees' views forward but without the possibility of refugees themselves having access to a consultative or decision-making process at the district level, where development planning occurs. There are still significant blocks to social and political integration for refugees in Uganda – obstacles that were not addressed by the SRS.

In a context where repatriation is the stated government priority, where refugees suffer social, political and economic exclusion through the settlement system, and where refugee policy is divorced from the district level, it is indeed questionable whether the SRS was either developed or implemented as an integration strategy.

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1. Ana Low, ‘Local Integration: a durable solution for refugees?’, FMR25 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2538.pdf

2. www.refugeecouncilusa.org/ngo-stat-sreliance72905.pdf

3. Crisp, Jeff (2004). “The local integration and local settlement of refugees: a conceptual and historical analysis,” *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper No. 102, (www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/research/pendoc.pdf?tbl=RESEARCH&id=407d3b762)