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Refugees as a first stop for protection in Kampala

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As Rwandan refugees in Kampala, I and others like me are uniquely placed to help newly arrived refugees find their feet in the city. The work is demanding but vital.

Uganda is now the third-largest refugee-hosting country on the African continent, home to over 500,000 refugees.¹ In Kampala, Uganda's capital, tens of thousands of refugees have come from surrounding countries and beyond, melting into city life. I myself am one of these self-settled refugees. I fled Rwanda and came to Kampala about ten years ago.

While living in the city offers a range of opportunities which cannot be found in the rural camps, refugees in Kampala are expected to be self-reliant – find homes, work and fend for themselves – with very little support from international aid agencies. Navigating this while adjusting to a new environment is a physical and emotional struggle for many refugees. In the absence of international aid, there are many things refugees do to support one another in day-to-day life, and this mutual assistance is vital as the front line of protection.

In my first few years here a friend had offered me a loan to pay for some training

with a Ugandan jewellery maker who then, after training me, provided me with some materials to set up a small business of my own selling my jewellery designs around the city. I now work full-time at the Jesuit Refugee Service, an international organisation where I teach arts and crafts as livelihoods training for refugees. However, these technical skills that I pass on to my students form only a very small part of the overall support I am able to offer them at an emotional level or in friendly guidance. Outside my day-to-day role I spend evenings and weekends meeting refugees in need through several networks I have made in the city.

Support for refugees

Firstly, I create a space for therapeutic conversation about problems that people are often unable to express to others – topics that they might not be comfortable sharing with the authorities or with large, seemingly detached organisations. International agencies, with their financial,



Eugenie Mukandayisenga (in yellow dress) teaching handicrafts to fellow refugees, Kampala, Uganda.

time and resource constraints, can rarely offer personalised emotional support, and short-term interactions with strangers are not conducive for anyone to share their personal struggles. Refugees know that they will receive the most effective and appropriate assistance by working with individuals who have already been through the same thing.

Critically, these conversations also help me to understand how I can best offer assistance to meet their specific needs. I ask myself: Do they need money from me, or for me to offer them a room in my house, or for me to arrange and escort them to various appointments? Or is it sufficient for me to simply offer advice – to direct them to helpful service providers, to suggest opportunities to earn an income, or to help them manage their finances? While this approach can be extremely time- and resource-intensive, it allows me to offer tailored assistance.

Secondly, I serve as a local 'guide' to help other refugees – especially new arrivals – learn how to survive in Kampala. The list of potential needs and services for these refugees is seemingly endless. These have included accompanying individuals to the police station when they are summoned, and informing them of their rights so that they are not abused by opportunistic officials; taking them to the hospital when ill, injured or pregnant; and helping with death certificates and burial arrangements.

Thirdly, I offer guidance and support to young school-age women, both refugees and Ugandan nationals. Women's rights are a serious problem here in Kampala but seldom discussed.² I have recently assisted a young female refugee who desperately wanted to go to school but who was unable to secure the funds to pay fees, buy a uniform and cover other related costs. Without an education, she felt she had no possibility of building a promising future. Others in this situation will sometimes achieve financial security and therefore the opportunity to pursue their academic aspirations by getting into a relationship with an older man. For this young woman, I intervened as quickly as I could by speaking to her school and covering her costs. I wanted to make sure that her

physical, sexual and mental security was protected. I also offered advice to her and her family in order to encourage them and to give them ideas about how they can continue covering these costs themselves in the future. Again, building a close relationship with this family allowed me firstly to understand their situation and then to offer advice from a friendly position as compared to ad hoc and untailored advice that is sometimes provided by international agencies.

Observations

These small efforts that I make are enacted at the individual level but the impact can be monumental, improving the well-being of whole families and wider social networks. Through my work, and that which other individuals and refugee community organisations do, we are able to inspire other refugees to follow a similar path of service, to reclaim dignity and security in situations that deprive them of opportunity, and to reject frequently imposed stereotypes that refugees are lazy and incapable individuals.

Providing help for other refugees is not without challenges and it is important to recognise what individuals go through in order to help others. A significant time commitment is required to build relationships with people and listen to their real needs. When individuals approach me, they know that they are talking to someone who cares about them and who will be there for them until their problems are resolved or are more manageable. As a mother of two, I am constantly balancing the needs of my own family with those of others, pushing my resources as far as they will go.

There are very few external organisations that offer such robust assistance from the time a refugee arrives in country until they are more settled. In an ideal situation, the largest service providers – including UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), its implementing partners and the Ugandan government – would allocate more resources to increasing the amount of contact with refugees in their daily operations.

There are limitations, however, to how far institutions can change in this respect.

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Many organisations are constrained by donors' demands or unwieldy bureaucratic structures and expectations, or they lack the willpower or interest to change their responses, thus stifling opportunities to improve the delivery of services. It is all the more critical, therefore, that they recognise the invaluable service that locally settled refugees like myself provide to others in need.

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1. UNHCR News update December 2015
www.unhcr.org/567414b26.html

2. In 2014 I wrote a blog on this topic looking at how violence affects livelihoods in refugee communities here in Kampala:
<http://bit.ly/RSC-HIP-Mukandayisenga-2014>

