

Adult literacy: an essential component of the CRRF

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Literacy needs among the refugee populations of Uganda and Ethiopia are vast, yet although both are CRRF pilot countries – and therefore in theory committed to promoting literacy – functional adult literacy is barely supported at all.

People uprooted from their homes are even more vulnerable if they cannot read and write. Adult education and Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) – that is, the ability to apply the skills of reading, writing and written calculations to the requirements of daily life – are crucial for refugees to be able to realise their rights to education, development and meaningful participation. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compacts on Refugees and for Migration emphasise the need to find ways to help displaced people gain access to jobs and income opportunities, for which FAL is essential. However, even when FAL in refugee and internally displaced persons contexts is promoted and included in national response plans, it often receives little or no funding.

Uganda and Ethiopia host the largest refugee populations in Africa. The majority of these refugees are from South Sudan, a country with a general literacy rate of just 27%. Both are CRRF pilot countries and both have refugee policies in place (in addition to the CRRF commitments) that promote education for adults: in Uganda's case, through its Protection and Durable Solutions Strategy (PDSS) 2016–2020; and

in Ethiopia's case, through its Refugee Education Strategy 2015–2018. However, the reality in terms of implementing and providing support for FAL programmes for refugees has been disappointing.

In Uganda, the Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) has been supporting and facilitating FAL and English language learning groups in refugee settlements and camps since 1997 but it is still the only non-governmental organisation (NGO) doing so, apart from UN Women which has recently started a literacy programme for South Sudanese women in four districts in the Northern Region. In settlements where FRC does not operate, there are only a couple of NGOs running just a few learning groups (to complement their routine activities). UNHCR Uganda has made no allocation for FAL in its education budget, and in the last five years no funds have been allocated by the Government of Uganda for adult literacy.

In Ethiopia, FRC recently carried out a needs assessment in Gambella region, where South Sudanese refugees are hosted; our findings indicate that as of September 2018 only two small FAL projects, reaching just a few hundred learners, are currently

being implemented, despite the ambitious target of enrolling 25,000 adults set out in Ethiopia's Refugee Education Strategy.

Implementing FAL in Uganda

The demand for FAL among South Sudanese refugees is very high, including in English, which is the language of communication with government officials, social service providers and Ugandans, for studying and for interacting in the marketplace. During 2015–17 some 9,000 learners in Uganda, from both refugee and host communities, regularly attended FRC's FAL courses in their mother tongues (68% of learners) and functional English language (32%).

The learning cycle includes two levels: basic (lasting 11 months) and intermediate (five months). No more than 30 learners are enrolled per learning group, which is facilitated by one community instructor. Functionality is emphasised throughout the learning cycle, which includes essential skills that refugees need in order to be active in their communities and to operate more confidently, effectively and independently. Topics include maternal and child health and nutrition, hygiene and sanitation, environment-friendly agricultural practices, financial literacy for transactions and savings, and gender equality, rights and obligations. Reading materials have been reproduced in the most widely-spoken languages in the settlements, and mobile libraries have been established to circulate books for learners to practise and sustain the skills they have acquired.

At the end of each course, written tests evaluate learners' reading, writing and numeracy skills and their ability to adapt acquired skills to everyday life, while a qualitative monitoring tool called Pathways of Empowerment captures information on learners' sense of empowerment and self-reliance. For instance, some learners have become less dependent on others, demonstrated by their new ability to use mobile phones independently to make calls, send texts and make simple calculations. Others reported their ability to check their names in distribution lists and verify whether

they had actually received the food and non-food items to which they were entitled. And it was observed that parents, especially mothers, were able to support, or at least motivate, their children in doing homework and to monitor their progress at school, as well as to follow written medical prescriptions.

In 2017 FRC started piloting learning groups in three settlements – Kyangwali, Kyaka and Nakivale – with more tailored curricula. The courses run for six months and provide functional curricula tailored to each learning group's core interest, such as poultry keeping or the establishment of a savings and loan group. Literacy topics arise naturally from the livelihood activities in which learners are engaged.

Good practice and remaining challenges

It has proven helpful that the programme has a strong presence within learners' communities; offices and staff are located in the settlements or close by and it utilises the local leadership structure to involve their communities (refugee as well as host) and to seek and identify community members as prospective instructors/facilitators (for whom high-quality training has been vital). The programme responds to requests and needs particularly relevant in the refugee context; topics and themes are often suggested directly by learners, and it is evident that combining literacy/language courses with livelihood skills training further motivates learners.

However, some challenges remain. Despite the use of the Pathways of Empowerment monitoring tool, the impact of the programme is still not being adequately recorded and documented; this will require further efforts and enhancing the skills of and tools available to the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Team. The programme is not yet fully inclusive; thanks to specific actions taken to include them (such as by encouraging young mothers to attend classes with their babies), women now represent the majority of learners but there is still little participation of persons with disabilities of either gender. Specific needs assessments should be carried out, possibly by persons with disabilities themselves, with the aim of creating friendly



and accessible learning environments for learners with special educational needs.

Furthermore, recruiting refugees who have the educational level required to become instructors can be challenging. And skilled instructors often resign to take up better job opportunities elsewhere, while mobility among refugees and an inevitable turnover mean the programme has to keep identifying and mentoring new facilitators. Many languages are spoken in the settlements but organising FAL courses in all languages is not feasible, and there is always the risk that choosing one of the main ethnic languages over others could raise tensions among the groups; reproducing reading materials in as many languages as possible, however, even though the classes cannot be provided in these languages, has helped.

Effective application of the CRRF in pilot countries like Uganda cannot occur if refugees' access to wider and better education services continues to be overlooked. FRC's experience of providing and promoting adult education and functional literacy services over the last 20 years, through a development-oriented approach, highlights the potential of such interventions. With further fine-tuning, greater coordination with adult education organisations and synergies with livelihoods programmes, this model could be expanded to have much greater impact on improving displaced people's skills, productivity and income, thereby helping them to reduce their vulnerability and enhance their opportunities.

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