

Hope and opportunities for young people

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Displaced youth urgently need education and training in marketable skills so that they can be participants and leaders in the rebuilding of their communities.

While in theory displacement is meant to be short term, in reality that is rarely the case and millions of young people around the world are growing up in the confines of refugee camps and urban shanty towns, having never known any other way of life. For older children and young adults growing up in protracted conflicts, the challenges are acute. Displaced young people face all the complexities and uncertainties of any adolescent but with very few opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills and experiences required for a healthy transition to adulthood. With few options and prospects for the future, young people are vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups, one of the few viable options for employment, or they may resort to dangerous jobs, criminal activity and drug and alcohol abuse. Girls are also particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.¹

According to research by the Women's Refugee Commission in various conflict-affected countries, young people overwhelmingly cite the lack of good education as one of their top concerns. They link the absence of education closely to poverty, unemployment and lack of basic necessities, such as food, clothing, shelter and health care.²

What's needed?

Creative interventions are required, such as second-chance educational programmes that allow young people to enter or re-enter school, and accelerated learning programmes that allow them to complete the normal six-year primary school curriculum in two to three years. However, young people also need vocational skills and job training programmes that are market-driven and lead to sustainable employment opportunities. They need life skills education – training in communication skills, financial

literacy, HIV/AIDS awareness, leadership development and conflict mediation. The youth programmes that appear to be the most effective combine employment readiness, basic education and life skills.³

Whereas adults may have a wealth of life experience to draw upon when making livelihood choices, young people are ill-prepared to make these decisions without assistance. The vocational training needs of young people are different from those of adults and need to include not just occupation-specific skills but also a set of business, academic and life skills. No less important than the training itself are the follow-up mechanisms to monitor the progress of participants and offer support where needed.

Education and job-readiness programmes should also take into account the different needs, experiences and constraints facing young women and men. In many countries, young women do not have equal access to education and skills-building programmes. Conflict and displacement create new and increased risks and responsibilities for young women; they may have less time than boys to participate in classes due to household chores and responsibilities, and security concerns about travel may also prevent their attendance. Additional barriers for girls include traditional beliefs that favour sending boys rather than girls to school or training programmes, as well as early marriage. A lack of female teachers and single-sex classes can also limit their participation. Education and livelihood programmes must therefore work closely with the local community to identify barriers to young women's participation and design programmes that overcome these, such as by providing childcare,

distance learning opportunities and flexible attendance options.

Young people do not want training for the sake of training; they want market-driven skills development programmes. Young people interviewed by the Women's Refugee Commission in northern Uganda spoke of their expectations of vocational training. For one young woman, the main goal was self-employment: "I thought I would make money out of the training and then go and help my children with school fees."

One 23-year-old talked about training he had attended: "During the course of the training, we were told we could make money. So my thought was confirmed about making money. That maybe I would have start-up tools or capital to continue the skill – but there was nothing." It is critical that training objectives are clearly stated so that participants' expectations are not falsely raised.

Northern Uganda

In many ways, young people in northern Uganda have been the group most deeply affected by the brutal conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. In the past 20 years, hundreds of thousands of young people have seen their communities attacked and destroyed, have lost parents and relatives to violence and disease, been separated from their families and displaced from their homes.

The vast majority of young women and men have missed out on opportunities to go to school because of extreme poverty, insecurity, abduction, poor health and household responsibilities. Many youth who lost their parents are responsible for caring for younger siblings and are unable to continue their studies. Young women and men who were abducted and missed school while in captivity are often unable to re-enter

the school system. Few second-chance or 'catch-up' programmes were in evidence in our May 2007 assessment to support youth who wished to re-enter the formal education system.

The other concern most widely voiced by youth was the lack of opportunities to earn a safe and dignified income to support themselves and their families. Exploitation and abuse, poor health and hygiene, and lack of food are all a direct result of this. Girls may engage in sex for money, gifts or employment while boys under the age of 18 are susceptible to recruitment by the Uganda People's Defence Force, as it provides one of the few opportunities to earn some money. Many young people with whom the Women's Refugee Commission spoke called for more vocational training and income-generation projects.

When training programmes are available, many do not appear to result in increased income as there is not sufficient market analysis to identify what vocational training is appropriate in camps, towns and areas of return. While community members are routinely consulted to identify specific programme activities, without adequate analysis the programmes tend to be the same, one-size-fits-all model. Meanwhile, few programmes facilitate the

transition from training to paid employment. Without interventions that lead to future opportunities, these young people will have little recourse but to survive through all available means, even if it means placing themselves at risk.

Afghanistan

As thousands of refugees are returning to Afghanistan, the focus is largely on future employment opportunities. An International Rescue Committee (IRC) programme provides training to both young men and women calibrated to the needs of the labour market and is using technology to connect young people to jobs. Afghan youth are trained in Pakistan based on market assessments conducted in Afghanistan; once they have completed their training their information is entered into a database that is accessible to potential employers in Afghanistan. This approach connects refugee youth with meaningful employment opportunities once they return, so they can quickly reintegrate and support themselves and contribute to their families and the reconstruction and development of their home country.

Recommendations

If they are to earn income for their families, support community

development and contribute to peace building and post-conflict community rebuilding, young people in protracted displacement contexts need greater opportunities for good quality, relevant education and skills development that are linked to safe, legal and dignified work. This requires the following:

- **Provide a comprehensive package of services** that includes basic education, 'catch-up' classes and transferable vocational skills that would be useful while displaced as well as once they return home or are resettled in a third country. Distance-learning opportunities via computers, mobile phones and radio may be appropriate for displaced communities. The private sector should be included in curriculum development and incentives provided for businesses to increase apprenticeships for youth. Programmes should not reinforce gender stereotypes but rather work with elders and the community to provide young women with greater opportunities.
- **Support market assessments and research into viable job opportunities** in camps, countries of resettlement and home countries. Emphasis should be on vocations and skills that are transferable, such as financial literacy, computer skills and language skills. While in the camps, young people could be trained in the production of goods that are currently provided by relief agencies (such as charcoal, soap and sanitary materials), which they can then produce and sell.
- **Expand displaced youths' access to the labour market.** In protracted refugee contexts, the UN, donors and international NGOs should encourage host governments to allow refugees to work. Any system must include protective mechanisms to ensure that displaced youth are not exploited or put in greater danger. Young people should also have access to materials and credit to start small businesses.
- **Promote self-assessment** in all youth vocational training programmes. Young people should be given the tools to think



ZOA computer class, Mae La Camp, Mae Sot, Thailand. May 2008.

possible job opportunities that best match their skills and needs. In every camp or urban settlement, one central location should be established where information is available on courses and job opportunities.

Youth is a stage of life marked by uncertainty, change and challenge. It is also a time of enormous potential, enthusiasm and energy, when young people make choices based on available opportunities to plan for their transition to adulthood. There is an urgent need to enhance the opportunities available to displaced young people so they can make better choices, ultimately allowing them to fulfill their potential and go on to live strong, healthy, prosperous lives.

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The Women's Refugee Commission/Columbia University Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth includes a series of tools to help young people become active participants in determining which vocation best matches their skills and needs. Available at http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_ysl_toolkit.pdf

*See also the Women's Refugee Commission's May 2009 report **Building Livelihoods: A Field Manual for Practitioners in Humanitarian Settings** online at <http://tinyurl.com/WRCLivMan09>*

1. See Women's Refugee Commission reports: 'Listening to Youth: The Experience of Young People in Northern Uganda'. http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_machel_short.pdf; 'Living in Limbo: Burma's youth in Thailand see few opportunities to use education



IRC training programme, Kitgum IDP camp, northern Uganda.

and vocational skills' http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/th_youth.pdf; 'Too Little for Too Few: Meeting the Needs of Youth in Darfur' http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/df_youth.pdf

2. 'Youth Speak Out: New Voices on the Protection and Participation of Young People Affected by Armed Conflict.' Women's Refugee Commission. Jan 2005. http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/cap_ysofinal_rev.pdf

3. 'Youth Microenterprise and Livelihoods: State of the Field' Lessons from the 2007 Global Youth Microenterprise Conference, Making Cents International. Jan 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/MakingCents08>