

Naturalisation of Burundian refugees in Tanzania

Amelia Kuch

Tanzania's offer of citizenship to some 200,000 refugees received international attention and support. Acknowledging the strengths and flaws of this model could potentially help unlock other situations of protracted displacement around the world.

In 2007 the Tanzanian government, in partnership with the Burundian government and UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), adopted the Tanzania Comprehensive Solutions Strategy (TANCOSS) which outlined a plan for durable solutions for the Burundian refugees who had been in Tanzania since 1972. Initially, TANCOSS included three pillars: voluntary repatriation to Burundi, processing of citizenship applications for those who opted for naturalisation in Tanzania, and relocation of the naturalised refugees from the refugee settlements to other regions of Tanzania. 79% of refugees opted for Tanzanian citizenship while 21% opted for repatriation (and duly returned to Burundi). The relocation plan was subsequently suspended, however, with naturalised refugees permitted to choose if they wish to be relocated or remain in the areas of the settlements.

Conditions and drivers

The close affinity of the groups living in the area of Burundi and western Tanzania and their historical mobility across what is now the border were important preconditions for local integration of refugees. The refugees often cited historical affinity and acquired familiarity with Tanzania as important factors in their decision to opt for naturalisation. Similarly, many Tanzanians expressed the opinion that living with the refugees was possible due to ethnic, religious and linguistic similarities.

After fleeing Burundi in 1972, the refugees had been allocated land to farm and live on in three sites in western Tanzania. This policy of refugee protection was motivated both by President Julius Nyerere's genuine commitment to Pan-African ideals and the opportunities that refugees provided for attracting resources for the development

of remote and under-populated regions of the country. The nature of the rural refugee settlements in which access to land was provided played a central role in the implementation of TANCOSS and what became known as the Old Settlements turned out to be a success in terms of agricultural production and trade. To a certain extent, the design of the policy was only viable because the refugees had land, becoming self-sufficient and indeed contributing greatly to the local economy. Moreover, refugees' decision to opt for Tanzanian citizenship was in many cases motivated by their inability to obtain land in Burundi. This is not to say that land is a prerequisite for successful local integration but that the ability to achieve sustainable livelihoods is crucial, and in many places in Africa this is synonymous with securing access to land.

On a macro-political level the key drivers of implementation of TANCOSS were exceptional leadership and the responsiveness of donors – that is, the availability of funding. The UNHCR Representative and the Tanzanian Home Affairs Minister were determined to negotiate a solution for the 1972 group of Burundian refugees, and UNHCR put out a quick and successful supplementary appeal, calling on donors to support the design and application of TANCOSS. Ultimately, a total of \$103 million was included in the 2011-15 United Nations Development Assistance Plan (UNDAP) for Tanzania meant for relocation and integration of naturalised refugees.

Lessons of TANCOSS

Approximately 45,000 refugees decided to repatriate as part of the UNHCR-organised repatriation scheme (and many others left individually over the years). Those who



Burundi refugee woman applying for Tanzanian citizenship in 2008 in Ulyankulu Settlement for the '1972 Burundi refugees'.

still had relatives in Burundi and were able to regain their property settled in the areas they were familiar with. Many others, however, were housed in Peace Villages built for the purpose of reintegrating IDPs and returning refugees.¹ Access to land became an immediate point of conflict and contestation. People's social networks had become extremely weak back in Burundi and when in May 2015 civil unrest broke out many repatriated refugees fled again to Tanzania. Some of them wanted now to receive Tanzanian citizenship but TancoSS had stated clearly that the decision to opt for repatriation could not be reversed.

The situation of 'recycled' Burundian refugees confirms the necessity of adopting more flexible approaches to repatriation. In this case refugees themselves suggest that possible solutions could include: allowing a certain amount of time for the repatriates to determine if they wish to remain in Burundi or still apply for Tanzanian citizenship; special affordable channels for the 'recycled' refugees to apply for residence permits and work legally in Tanzania; and further strengthening of regional cooperation, which could ultimately enable people to travel freely between the

countries and to establish livelihoods and businesses in both Burundi and Tanzania.

In the years 2010-14 the process of naturalisation stalled and it was unclear if it would be completed. In fact, several statements by the Government of Tanzania during this period suggested declining government commitment to the process and the possibility that the decision to grant citizenship could be reversed.² The lack of information provided about what was happening caused fear and anxiety among the refugees, and it highlighted UNHCR's inability to intervene and encourage the completion of the process. The delay in naturalisation came from a combination of factors but included refusal at the district level to resettle refugees. Clearly, if future cases of naturalisation are to be encouraged, it will be necessary to ensure that local representatives are better included in the process.

In October 2014 refugees who opted for naturalisation finally received citizenship certificates. However, there are still at least 40,000 applications pending and it is unclear how and when they are going to be dealt with. This is a pressing issue, which causes continuing uncertainty in the lives of many families.

May 2016

www.fmreview.org/solutions

Thinking ahead

As refugees changed their status from non-citizens to citizens, one of the settlements, Ulyankulu, which for over 40 years was largely marginal and isolated, is now being naturalised and incorporated into a new district. Over the years many Tanzanians from the neighbouring villages moved to the area of the settlements in search of fertile land and business opportunities. The space and the demographics of the settlement are transforming rapidly as more and more Tanzanians by birth are coming in, attracted by the prospects of district formation and hoping for better access to infrastructure and

services. The transformation of a camp into an urban centre provides an opportunity for development actors and the national government to further aid the integration of the new citizens and the local population.

Amelia Kuch Amelia.Kuch@ed.ac.uk

PhD Candidate, University of Edinburgh
www.ed.ac.uk and Aarhus University
www.au.dk/en/

1. See Falisse J B and Niyonkuru R C (2013) 'Peace villages for repatriates to Burundi', *Forced Migration Review* issue 43. www.fmreview.org/fragilestates/falisse-niyonkuru
2. Milner J (2014) 'Can global refugee policy leverage durable solutions?: Lessons from Tanzania's naturalization of Burundian refugees', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 27(4). <http://jrs.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/08/09/jrs.fe023>

