

Unable to see the future: refugee youth in Malawi speak out

Lauren Healy

In a protracted refugee setting like Dzaleka, where multiple generations are born and raised, young refugees are struggling to hold on to hopes and dreams for a future that does not include the label of 'refugee'.

In Malawi, 45km north of the capital city of Lilongwe, lies the Dzaleka refugee camp, home to approximately 15,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Ethiopia. As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Malawi is obliged to adhere to the Convention but, as was its right, made nine reservations. The reservations pertain to the provisions of wage-earning employment, public education, labour legislation, social security and freedom of movement for refugees within Malawi. These reservations pose complex challenges, especially for adolescents entering into adulthood who wish to seek higher education, gain employment, marry and begin families.

In Dzaleka, school-aged children are offered pre-school through secondary school education at no cost. However, if and when students graduate from secondary school, there is little opportunity for tertiary-level or higher adult education due to limited capacity and inadequate resources. To help close this gap, Jesuit Commons Higher Education at the Margins¹ began providing Internet-based distance learning in 2010, while the World University Service of Canada enables a selected number of qualified secondary-school graduates to resettle in Canada and attend university. But placements in these higher education programmes are extremely competitive and only a very small number of individuals meet the required standards.



Team-building activity for adolescents, Dzaleka refugee camp, Malawi

The majority of youth in Dzaleka have spent all their lives in Malawi, taught the same school curriculum as the local population, surrounded by a local culture and among a local people yet not free to integrate as local citizens: “We are just like Malawians but yet we are not Malawians.” (Martha, an 18-year-old from DRC²)

Without the inherent rights and freedoms of citizens, the younger generation of refugees is more and more despondent. When asked what he would do upon graduating from secondary school, Sal, a 20-year-old Burundian, said, “I want to become a doctor” – a feasible goal for Sal who receives perfect marks and is ranked number one amongst his fellow learners. But when asked “What do you want to do after graduating from secondary school if you are still living here in the refugee camp?”, without hesitation Sal replied, “Here in Dzaleka it cannot happen. When you live in camp you change your behaviours, your expectations. It can’t happen because I am a refugee.”

Peter from DRC explained the effect that camp life has on him. Although agreeing that there were positive aspects to camp life because they were not living in fear of civil war or being recruited as soldiers, he said: “Life in camp is difficult because we cannot see our future. ... You can look around and you are an old man walking with a stick, not having reached your goals.”

What about finding a life partner and beginning a family together? Rashid, an 18-year-old Congolese man, replied, “In my country you become a man when you marry and have children of your own. Your family gives you a plot of land and you go about your business. Here, no, I am afraid to marry. Where will we go – what will we do?

I cannot marry.” Others agreed that marriage was not an option for them – although an increasingly common trend amongst camp youth is early pregnancy, young parenthood and rising levels of school drop-outs.

A sentiment shared by the young adults in Dzaleka is that the current situation and the challenges they face entering into adulthood are largely out of their control: “Put everything in the hands of God, then maybe the future will be better.” “It’s a situation. You have to accept it.” Whether or not adolescents use fate, religion or family support as tools for coping, there is generally a lack of a sense of agency to relationships, to employment and to educational prospects.

Services for displaced youth in refugee camp settings should work toward addressing the issue of hopelessness by giving youth the opportunity to express their wants and needs in an open forum. Services might do well to provide adolescent youth and young adults with a safe space to organise social, political and entrepreneurial groups, empowering and strengthening their self-worth, while at the same time improving quality of life during displacement. Creating more opportunities for higher education programmes will provide a realistic means for youth to fulfill their short- and long-term goals of becoming contributing adults.

Lauren Healy LaurenHealy3@gmail.com is a mental health counsellor with Jesuit Refugee Service www.jrs.net and a higher education instructor with JC-HEM (working in the Dzaleka refugee camp since January 2011). These opinions do not reflect those of JRS.

1. See Dankova & Giner, ‘Technology in aid of learning for isolated refugees’, FMR 38 www.fmreview.org/technology/dankova-giner.html

2. All names have been changed.