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**Research Report**

## Build towns instead of camps: Uganda as an example of integrative refugee policy

Briefing Paper, No. 19/2016

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

*Suggested Citation:* Kreibaum, Merle (2016) : Build towns instead of camps: Uganda as an example of integrative refugee policy, Briefing Paper, No. 19/2016, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/199783>

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## Build Towns Instead of Camps: Uganda as an Example of Integrative Refugee Policy

### Summary

The public perception of the situation of refugees differs from the facts in two key aspects: the overwhelming majority of refugees stay in poor neighbouring countries adjoining their place of origin (86 percent) and they stay there a very long time (17 years on average). Although this has been known for a considerable time, these host countries frequently receive no support and refugees have scarcely any opportunity to establish themselves permanently and integrate into their host communities. As a consequence, thought is increasingly being paid to replacing the typical refugee camps – which are primarily designed for the provision of emergency support for refugees – with longer term approaches in refugee policy.

One example of a successfully integrative refugee policy – and therefore a possible role model for other countries – is that of Uganda. Since 1999 the Ugandan government has pursued an approach of local social and economic integration of refugees. They receive land, are permitted to work and are thus intended to become independent of assistance. This liberal policy is also of benefit to the native population: the enhanced economic dynamic in areas in which many refugees live leads to higher consumption and improved access to public infrastructure for people in neighbouring villages. In particular, they are also able to use the schools and health clinics operated by the aid organisations.

However, the subjective perception of the local population does not reflect these positive developments: they view their economic situation as poorer than people in other areas of Uganda. Local conflicts over land flare up frequently

and there are indications that the Ugandan government spends less on the operation of health clinics and the support of poor people in districts with a high refugee presence. Although the government and the aid organisations strive to ensure that none of the groups is worse off than the other and to dismantle prejudices through encounters, the (perceived) competition for resources endures.

The Ugandan experiences and challenges in the support of refugees in Kenya and Jordan underscore the major potential of an integrative refugee policy. The local population can benefit from this and costs are saved in the support of refugees. Four recommendations can be drawn from the analysis for host countries that house large numbers of refugees:

- Building settlements instead of camps and giving refugees the right to work results in an economic dynamism that also benefits the local population in the region.
- This requires good co-ordination between national government and international donors, for example with regard to public services and the allocation of funding.
- To avoid conflicts between refugees and the local population, it is advisable to inform the native citizens of the advantages and encourage interaction between the two groups.
- Particular consideration should be given to poor population groups, who should not be disadvantaged by the presence of the refugees. Aid payments should be considered where appropriate.

Civil wars and crises have resulted in growing numbers of refugees at least since 2010, not just since the recent increasing attention from Europe, as a consequence of the growth in migration movements there. The vast majority of refugees remain in the countries adjoining their states of origin in the global South; 86 percent of all refugees find protection in developing countries. However, these states often already find it hard to provide adequate support for their own populations. At the same time, many refugees remain in their host countries for a long time, as the situation in their home countries fails to improve over the course of years and decades. According to UNHCR, 45 percent of all displaced persons spend more than five years abroad, with the average stay as long as 17 years.

These challenges have long been known to the international community. For example, at the two conferences on the support of refugees in Africa (ICARA I and II) in 1981 and '84 there was already discussion of improved distribution of the burden between donors and African host countries. The objective was to secure sustainable solutions through local integration. However, these resolutions resulted in few tangible policy consequences. Some twenty years later the ideas were re-addressed by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) in its declaration "on local integration" (2005), with the 2011 World Development Report also emphasising the "development challenge" posed to poor neighbouring countries by the hosting of refugees. In spite of this, refugee policy remains primarily focused on camps and long-term emergency aid.

This approach can be illustrated in the form of two current examples; one long-established refugee camp and one newly-founded one: for 25 years now primarily Somali refugees have been housed in Dadaab, the largest refugee camp in the world. The current population of the camp is approximately 320,000 people. The camp recently attracted worldwide attention following the announcement of the Kenyan government plans to close Dadaab. The camp has an isolated location in the desert. Its residents are not permitted to leave or work; leaving them dependent on aid as a consequence. In addition to the perceived threat of terrorism, high costs were also named as the reason for closure.

Zaatari in Jordan was established as recently as 2012 and currently houses some 80,000 Syrian refugees, it is also a refugee camp in the classic mould. However, it is increasingly evolving into a quasi-permanent town with a shopping street, small firms and crafts. To augment the sparse aid rations many refugees work illegally to enable themselves and their families to get by. Jordan also bears considerable costs in supporting refugees, estimated at 870 million US dollars per year. These two examples and the figures stated in the introduction underscore the dilemma that the conventional camp approach faces: structures and regulations assume a short stay on the

part of the refugees, a crisis that soon passes. However, in actual fact the circumstances often endure for a very long time, making a more distant horizon more appropriate for the conception of measures.

### **A refugee policy oriented towards local integration ...**

Uganda is an example of a successfully integrative refugee policy – and therefore a possible role model for other countries. Since the 1990s the country has consistently numbered among the leading host countries worldwide for refugees. 520,000 displaced persons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda and Eritrea are currently housed amongst a population of 38 million. The government follows an unusual refugee policy, having initiated a system of local social and economic integration as early as 1999. The goal is for refugees to become independent of aid and strengthen both themselves and the region in which they live. Specifically, this means that instead of being housed in tent villages they are assigned to settlements, where they receive a parcel of land and a "starter kit" with seed, tools and similar items. They are allowed to move and work freely. However, support from the government and the UNHCR is only provided within these settlements. In addition, parallel structures for public services are also dismantled: refugees and Ugandans make joint use of the schools and health clinics run by aid organisations, with these gradually taken over by the Ugandan government.

However, despite the liberal approach, there is no full legal integration, i.e. the acquisition of citizenship – including for second-generation refugees. Moreover, the refugees are not permitted to establish "permanent structures", such as the planting of perennial crops. Even refugees that have spent as many as twenty years in the country or were born there are expected to return to their home country with the onset of peace.

### **... hat the native population also benefits from**

Overall, the Ugandan refugee policy is regarded as exemplary, and has also been praised by bodies such as the UNHCR. The approach combines emergency aid with development co-operation. In this way refugees should be given a future perspective instead of an uncertain status prevailing for years. One positive side effect is that economically independent refugees are cheaper to house, meaning that scarce national and international resources can be utilised elsewhere.

In previously isolated regions the strong growth in population combined with measures of the government and the international community have resulted in increased economic dynamism. The refugees are both producers and consumers, resulting in the formation of new markets. The new infrastructure, such as roads, that

**Figure 1: Signs in the Kyaka refugee settlement (Uganda)**

Source: Author

aid organisations require for their work is also available to the population at large. Local residents report that these developments have altered the villages beyond recognition. The consumption of Ugandans also increases measurably in comparison to regions of the country in which no refugees live.

This is joined by the fact that public services such as schools and health clinics built and operated by the international community for refugees are also accessible to the local population. In addition to this improved access to services, they are often of better quality and better equipped than corresponding state institutions. The presence of refugees also means that a "critical mass" is achieved that makes the provision of primary schooling in particular worthwhile. Here too, the people of adjoining villages benefit in comparison to their fellow citizens in regions without refugees.

### Scarce resources create tension

In spite of these successes, the relationship between the refugees and the local population represents a particular challenge. This is a decisive factor in successful integration. The two groups have similar socio-economic characteristics. Interaction is initiated primarily by the local population, which enters the settlements to use the schools and health clinics and to trade. Both groups are very poor and poorly educated. They primarily live on subsistence farming. Due to these similarities, both groups are equally affected by extreme weather conditions or plant and animal diseases that reduce agricultural yields. However, the local farmers do not enjoy the same "safety net" as refugees, in the form of humanitarian aid and food rations. To avoid the emergence of envy or, possibly, violent reaction, the inclusion of villages adjacent to refugee settlements in policy planning is essential. For a number of settlements it is known that up to 40 percent of international aid funding flows into measures that either benefit the local

population directly or that promote rapprochement between the two groups.

On the other side, the refugees are also part of the development plans and the budget of the Ugandan districts. However, there are indications that district governments are unable to cope financially with the support of a further group requiring assistance: Ugandans that live in districts with refugee settlements and are dependent on state transfers see a fall in consumption compared to those in districts without refugees. In addition, these areas have fewer state-run health clinics than elsewhere. Both of these effects could be traced back to the diversion or reassignment of scarce funds. Despite this indirect competition for funding, both groups live alongside one another in largely peaceful coexistence.

However, one resource in particular is an increasing source of conflict: land. When the refugee settlements were founded, they were situated in thinly-inhabited areas and the refugees farmed land that would otherwise have been uncultivated. Since then both population groups have increased strongly and land has become a scarce resource. The boundaries of refugee settlements are disputed, both groups accuse each other of unauthorised use of the other's fields.

There are indications that this perceived competition for resources overshadows the objectively measured improvements in living conditions in the perception of the local population. Ugandans in areas with a high refugee presence assess their own economic situation as poorer than those in other parts of the country. The impression that refugees receive more support can also play a role here, as subjective wellbeing is dependent on the comparison group. These reservations and concerns of the local populations represent a central challenge for the local integration approach, as they reduce the willingness of the population to receive refugees.



### Opportunities for integrative refugee policy, including for other countries

The experiences described here underscore the immense potential of an integrative refugee policy, but also indicate areas that require particular consideration. Above all, the Ugandan example shows that native residents and the local economy can benefit from the presence of refugees instead of suffering from high costs. Ben Rawlence, human rights expert and author, also recommends that the Kenyan government grants the status of a town to the Dadaab camp. This would give people the opportunity to work instead of receiving aid. Rather than suppressing potential economic dynamism, Kenya could benefit from it. For Jordan, Killian Kleinschmidt, former head of the Zaatari camp, summarises thus: "We were building camps: storage facilities for people. But the refugees were building a city." This discrepancy and the refusal of the international aid community to acknowledge the long-term nature of such crises result in what he considers unnecessarily poor living conditions for refugees.

The implementation of the paradigm shift already executed on paper towards an integrative, long-term approach in international refugee policy calls for even more intensive coordination between donors and state, coupled with a willingness to adapt allocation decisions. This is apparent, for example, in the financial challenges

faced by the district governments in Uganda. The complete integration of refugees in a country would mean that all people could benefit equally from public infrastructure, regardless of the presence of refugees and donors. This requires regular agreement between national and international actors.

The involvement and informing of the local population is and remains important in the establishment of settlements for refugees. If reservations and concerns exist locally, these must be addressed proactively. This not only applies to Uganda. In Dabaab, Kenya, there are rumours about high numbers of terrorists and criminals, whilst in Zaatari in Jordan there are concerns about being disadvantaged by the high numbers of Syrian refugees.

Furthermore, it is also important to take the particularly vulnerable or very poor population groups into consideration. In Uganda these groups have not only failed to benefit from the presence of the refugees, but have also seen a fall in consumption. Here and elsewhere changes in living circumstances should be noted and these groups provided with material support where required, for example in the form of food aid or cash transfers.

All in all, policy considerations, initial quantitative evidence and the appraisal of experts from practical experience indicate that the approach of local integration should be followed, implemented and refined.

### References

Kreibaum, M. (2016). Their suffering, our burden? How Congolese refugees affect the Ugandan population. *World Development* 78 (February), 262–287.

*This work is part of the research project "Promoting food security in rural sub-Saharan Africa" of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) under its "One World – No Hunger" (SEWOH) initiative.*



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