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Children in Refugee Camps and Their Role in Refugee–Host Community Integration

Erick Nyambedha, Rose Jaji & Jana Kuhnt

Summary

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child significantly strengthened the legal basis for recognising children as actors with agency and a voice. In contrast to this, children in displacement contexts are still commonly portrayed as victims without agency. Children are dependent on adults, but that does not mean that they have no right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This policy brief sheds light on the active role that children in displacement situations can take in their daily lives to shape refugee–host interactions and local integration in camp settings. It discusses how the role of children in the social integration of refugees can be strengthened and supported, indicating potential areas for intervention.

With 40 per cent of the displaced population worldwide being below the age of 18, children form a significant part of this group (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023). However, there continues to be limited information on the perspectives and experiences of children in displacement situations, particularly those living in the Global South. Although there is some knowledge regarding interventions to support the integration of refugee children, not much has been said about their own initiatives with respect to social integration and mediating the circumstances that displacement and encampment entail.

Children change the world around them and invariably impact the adult-dominated processes of migration and integration when they participate. Independently from adults, children negotiate and construct relations during their interactions in public and private spaces, such as in (pre-)schools, organised sporting events and in private meeting points. They develop friendships and share learning materials, food and language. Through their agency, children build relations that are critical for the process of integration. This can transcend adult-dominated notions about the safety and securitisation of displacement contexts, thus transforming the conflict rhetoric associated

with refugee–host community relations. The role of children has become even more salient in view of efforts to facilitate integration through the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), a key framework guiding refugee policy in many refugee-hosting countries in the Global South. At the same time, children’s unique growth and developmental needs have to be adequately understood and incorporated into integration policies and programmes.

In this policy brief, we call for a change in policy and programming to recognise and support children’s critical role in social integration. We make the following recommendations to host governments, international agencies and local partners active in refugee camp settings to:

- Support more data collection and analysis of children’s actions in building relations that can foster integration in different displacement contexts.
- Ensure that children are included as a special category in policy frameworks. Their interests and needs should be taken into account by listening to their voices and providing platforms for exchanges with adults, policy-makers and practitioners.
- Create more opportunities for refugee and host community children to interact inside and outside of school environments.
- Support sensitisation programmes that bring together parents of refugee and host community children to understand the role of children in the integration process and to ensure that the views of adults as parents and guardians are also listened to and addressed.
- Address negative stereotypes and open conflicts between refugee and host community children that restrict free and positive interactions. This can include fostering dialogue and peaceful means to resolve conflicts as well as facilitating cooperation.

Introduction

Children depend on adults for protection and security, among other basic needs. They are particularly vulnerable and need adult guidance, even more so in displacement situations. This, however, does not mean that children should be depicted only as victims, because they can play a central role in terms of facilitating social integration.

At the end of 2022, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide passed the 100 million mark (UNHCR, 2023). The majority of these people live in countries of the Global South, many of them in refugee camps and other temporary settlements. In this policy brief, we focus specifically on camp settings, as the process of integration is likely to depend more on the opportunities provided through policies and programmes. Due to the restrictions on movement and spatial separation in camps, interaction with the local community tends to come less naturally and is more limited than in urban or rural areas, where refugees self-settle and blend more easily with the local population. Furthermore, refugee camps are usually located in regions surrounded by cultural and lingual homogeneity, which improves skills in the local language and encourages the building of positive relations between refugees and the host community necessary for social integration. Most of the refugees are also hosted in countries experiencing social, political and economic instability, and the presence of the refugees in such countries puts additional strain on already scarce resources and the limited economic opportunities. This, in turn, can spur social conflicts between refugees and the local population – a situation in which the building of positive relations becomes ever more important.

Children (below 18 years of age) are estimated to form a significant proportion of the displacement-affected populations globally at 40 per cent (Kaseje et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2023). However, apart from anecdotal evidence, little is known about their views, perceptions, experiences and needs in such displacement contexts. Here, empirical data is scarce, which is likely also due to

the methodological difficulties and ethical challenges related to collecting data from people under 18. This results in large knowledge gaps concerning the experiences of children in displacement situations. At the same time, children are particularly affected by the protracted nature of most displacement situations (lasting longer than five years), as many of them are born into a refugee life and will likely be the future “refugee” adult. Furthermore, there is a tendency to overlook the important role played by children in integration processes in migration and refugee policies and programmes. Children and their agency are generally not mentioned in related legal documents, for example the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR, adopted by the UN General Assembly at the end of 2018) and the resulting CRRF – an international framework that calls for a deeper integration of refugees in host countries.

In media reports and public debates, children in displacement-affected areas are most often displayed as victims whose experiences are primarily understood in terms of dependence and vulnerability. Children are rarely visible as actors in policy discussions, and they are primarily depicted as the passive beneficiaries of interventions and rarely as people who are capable of taking initiative and influencing events and relationships in their communities in situations of encampment and local integration. This ignores the reality that children change the world around them by acting on it and invariably impacting the adult-dominated processes of migration and integration.

In Kenya, for example, research revealed the potential of children’s agency and actions in displacement-affected contexts to play a role that can benefit the larger community by enhancing integration. Kenya is one of the countries currently piloting the implementation of the CRRF through the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Programme (KISED) in north-western Kenya. This integrated settlement was established in 2015 through a multi-agency collaboration intended to contribute towards improving the socio-economic conditions of the refugees and host communities as part of a re-orientation of the

refugee assistance programme. Kalobeyei is currently home to a young, predominantly South Sudanese refugee population, with children forming the majority (67 per cent) of its population. However, the children's perspectives and contributions are not systematically integrated into and highlighted in the overarching integration process, which renders them the silent majority in many displacement situations. The relationships built and nurtured in private and public spaces by the children of the refugee and host communities in Kalobeyei trickle down to the relations constructed by adults across the two communities. This stresses the opportunities to foster integration processes if children's perspectives, daily livelihood strategies and contributions are included and supported in policies and programmes.

Refugee–host community context as an environment for children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that the child has the right to freedom of association and freedom of peace and assembly. At the same time, Article 5 of the CRC provides that parents, members of the extended family and legal guardians have “responsibilities, rights and duties” to provide “appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights” (Article 5). Striking a balance between the rights of the child on the one hand, and the role of parents and legal guardians on the other can be a challenge, as the term “appropriate” has varied meanings in different cultural contexts. This challenge becomes even more pronounced in the case of refugee children, who may find themselves sandwiched between the cultures of the host country and the country of origin. Considering that the family is the primary institution for socialisation, parents wield a lot of influence on children's worldviews. This has implications on how children relate with members of the host community and other refugee communities within the host country.

Refugee parents may prefer to instil in their children cultural norms and values from the country of origin, even in instances where children

might rather prefer to adopt the culture of the host country. Refugee parents may also seek to socialise their children concerning historical and political tensions from the country of origin by transplanting ethnic conflicts from the country of origin to the host country. An example is the ethnic tensions between the Dinka and Nuer of South Sudan spilling over to Kenyan refugee camps. This can result in children from one community isolating themselves from the children of other refugee communities, especially those who their parents teach them to shun. Parents' attitudes towards the host community can also influence children and act as a deterrent to their social integration. Yet, refugee children who are able to choose friends from both their own community and the host community experience better mental health (Measham et al., 2014).

Literature and media reports present cases of conflicts between refugee and migrant children and their parents where the latter disapprove of their children's adoption of the host country's “immoral” ways. Tensions may be caused by parents seeing their children disobeying them on matters that include choice of dress, friends, entertainment and time spent outside the home. This mostly affects children in their teens and young adults as well as girls. Thus, the home can become a place where the integrational efforts of the children are not encouraged. In instances where refugee children prefer to adopt the host country's norms and values but face resistance from their parents and legal guardians, the children sometimes exercise their agency by running away from home. Some end up living in conditions where they are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and violence, while others seek protection from the host countries' child protection services. This can make it difficult for parents to instil values in their children and teach them to stay out of trouble, as the children – especially those in their teens and approaching young adulthood – can resist what they see as the imposition of country-of-origin values that are irrelevant in the host country. In view of this, programmes that focus on children need to assess

the conditions in which children apply their agency and include parents or guardians so that they do not create misunderstandings and exacerbate tensions between children and the adults who are legally responsible for them.

Refugee children who were born in the host country did not witness or directly experience the conflict that forced their parents to flee. They do not know any other life than the experiences gained while living in a refugee camp. This gives them different perspectives, which have yet to be adequately considered. They do not have memories of the country of origin to compare to the host country. Their lack of familiarity with the country of origin can result in less of an attachment to the country of origin and identifying more with the host country, even if their parents try to instil in them a sense of belonging and loyalty to the country of origin. Many cases of displacement have turned out to be long-term, in contrast to the general assumption underpinning encampment, namely that refugees are a temporary phenomenon and they will repatriate once the reasons for flight have ceased to exist. As many refugee children transition into adulthood in the camp setting of the host country, they need particular support to enable them to lead meaningful lives as adults in the host country, especially in view of the growing emphasis on self-reliance among refugees.

Children as actors in social integration

Although parents and legal guardians influence children's views, refugee children inevitably interact with the host community through various integrated institutions, which include (pre-)schools, places of worship, playgrounds and marketplaces. The interactions that characterise these spaces enable refugee children to integrate into the new context faster than their parents. Although children may be too young to conceptualise their activities as integration, they nonetheless contribute to the process of social integration by reaching out across the refugee–host community divide. For

example, refugee children tend to learn the host country's language(s) faster than their parents, which enables them to navigate everyday social spaces better than adults. Proficiency in the host country's language(s) works as an important integration tool, apart from improving the children's capabilities in the host country (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). Children can use their language skills to translate host country languages for their parents and guardians and facilitate adults' access to information and institutions in the host community. This empowers children as agents of change and integration to negotiate the social environment for their parents. This dependence of parents on their children's language proficiency and relative ease in navigating host country spaces reconfigures the relationship between adults and children in the sense of children becoming the bridge between refugee parents and the host country.

Refugee children's proficiency in the host country's language(s) enables them to experience life in the host country beyond adult influence and mediation, which enables them to demystify and deconstruct adults' notions of danger deriving from potential negative stereotypes of the host community. Media reports show how an integrated school environment can promote friendships among children and respect for each other's cultures and religious beliefs (Dowling, 2019). The skills that refugee children acquire are connected to the well-being of their families, for example they can allay parents' fears and anxieties (Beirens, Hughes, Hek, & Spicer, 2007). Children's agency challenges the idea of unidirectional socialisation from adults to children.

Friendships between local and refugee children potentially develop into social relationships between refugee and local parents. Adults, especially refugee parents, normally seek to protect their children by getting to know their friends. This leads them to getting to know these friends' parents, which creates situations in which acquaintances morph organically into friendships and social bonds that culminate into relationships

of exchange. In host regions where both refugees and host communities are economically marginalised, for example in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya, these social relationships also facilitate mutual dependence, cooperation and sharing of resources.

In places where refugee children find the needed support, this can facilitate their integration and nurture them to become well-adjusted individuals in the host community or country. This points to the need to include children in integration policies so that when they become adults, they do not face the same integration challenges as their parents.

Children's spaces as targets for policy interventions

Despite the significant role that children play in establishing and nourishing positive relationships and fostering integration in displacement situations, they find little consideration in current migration policies and programmes, apart from ensuring that their basic needs, such as schooling and health coverage, are met from adults' perspectives. In 2020, UNICEF and UNHCR agreed on a blueprint to accelerate joint efforts in line with the implementation of the GCR, focussing on the protection of children in refugee settings (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] & UNHCR, 2020). While these efforts are beyond question, the joint action plan does not recognise children as active agents. On the contrary, children can be an important group for supporting the long-term integration of refugee families in host communities, and their resourcefulness should be acknowledged and leveraged.

Spaces to meet and interact have been shown to be essential. The interface between public and private spaces – such as (pre-)schools, playgrounds, places of worship, marketplaces and the home – play an important role in providing the building blocks for mutual understanding and familiarity between refugees and the host community. Supporting platforms and spaces for positive interactions, such as joint schooling and sporting activities, can be low-hanging fruit in this

regard. This is also acknowledged by UNHCR's global education policy of "national integration", launched in 2012, which focusses on joint integrated schooling and opens possibilities for more interaction and social integration (Dryden-Peterson, Adelman, Bellino, & Chopra, 2019).

With respect to the joint services provided, it is of utmost importance to prevent any form of inequality from being perceived or experienced between refugee and host children, as it would likely be a source of tension and harm positive relations (Muhumed & Ahmed, 2022). There is evidence that inequality in education has led to negative experiences in camp settings where refugee children are more endowed with school materials than their counterparts from the host community. Equal access to resources and spaces as well as integrated social services are necessary for bridging both the education and social divides between refugee and host community children. Where mixed schools are not possible, funding for refugees can follow the "30-70" principle, stating that at least 30 per cent of all interventions for refugees should address the needs of the host community (Moyo, Sebba, & Zanker, 2021). Schools in host countries that have adequate resources can hire cultural brokers who can ensure the successful adaptation of refugee children in school (Yohani, 2013). In contrast, many schools in host countries in poor regions of the world are unable to provide this type of service, and the refugee children themselves become the cultural brokers.

Conclusions and recommendations

Children form a significant proportion of the displaced population worldwide, in some settings even a majority group. Although they are a particularly vulnerable group that needs special support and protection, this should not lead to a portrayal of them being merely victims without agency. This policy brief stresses the important role that refugee and host community children in displacement settings can play in the social

integration process, independent of adults' initiatives. Hence, we call for acknowledging the resourcefulness of children in these specific situations and offer the following policy recommendations to foster their agency:

- *Support spaces of interaction:* The most prominent space here is the school. Joint schooling and extra-curricular activities for refugee and host children are essential and need to be further promoted. This includes opening schools in camps to children from the host community and vice versa. Here, equal access to resources such as school materials and staffing is important to prevent tensions due to differential treatment and quality of education. Joint sport or leisure activities and religious services are additional interesting spaces for interaction.
- *Close knowledge gaps:* Support data collection among refugee and host community children in displacement contexts to improve understanding about their experiences, perceptions and views. It is important to deepen understanding on the quality of spaces for interaction, as well as the mechanisms and circumstances for building positive relationships that are sensitive to gender, age, class, religion and culture. This is essential to set up policies and programmes that use the potential of children in integration processes.
- *Give children a voice and listen:* Children and their specific needs based on their age, gender, class, religion and culture, among other variables, are mostly absent from policy and public discussions. Support platforms where they can exchange ideas and be heard ensure that children's needs are addressed, and

conditions are met to support their role as agents in the social integration process.

- *Include children as actors in policies and programmes:* Hosting countries should be supported in paying particular attention to tapping the resourcefulness of children in displacement situations. Allowing children to nominate their own representatives and providing space for them to share their views can be a mechanism to incorporate their interests in integration programmes and policies.
- *Bring adults on board:* Adults still dominate decisions and have to act in the best interests of the child. Sensitisation programmes that bring together parents of refugee and host community children to understand the role of children in the integration of refugees and host communities are necessary. This can entail support for and the promotion of inclusive social and cultural activities among children that bring adults from the refugee and host communities together and address their concerns about children's interactions.
- *Support children in overcoming negative stereotypes and conflict lines:* In contexts where negative stereotypes and open conflicts among different refugee groups as well as between the refugee and host communities exist, children should be supported in finding peaceful means to resolve conflicts and overcome stereotypes that harm positive relations. This is particularly relevant and promising in spaces where children interact and where cooperation is necessary, such as in schools and sporting events. This can include the peaceful resolution of conflict themes in drama clubs or increasing knowledge about the historical origins of stereotypes and conflict lines in societies.

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