

Talking Points for
H.E. Ambassador Marcel R. Tibaleka

Potsdam Spring Dialogues

Panel Discussion

Session IV:
Mobility and Movement:
Motor For Regional Economic Integration?

Uganda's experience with refugees dates back to the pre-independence era. The latest data shows that the refugee total as of the end of January 2016 stands at 495,594 of registered refugees and asylum seekers. Most of these people came to Uganda from South Sudan, DR Congo, Burundi and Somalia.

Uganda has one of the most progressive Refugee Acts on the African Continent. Part of the reason is to be found in my Government's attitude and approach to refugees. The status of refugees is clearly defined in the Mission and Vision of the *Uganda Department of Refugees* under the auspices of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). This goes hand in hand with the traditional hospitality and generous asylum policies of the Ugandan Government.

For example, when fighting erupted in South Sudan in December 2013 and the magnitude of the resulting humanitarian emergency, the Ugandan Government recognized South Sudanese fleeing to Uganda on a prima facie basis, and in coordination with UNHCR and other partners, mounted one of the country's largest coordinated emergency responses. Nearly 125,000 South Sudanese in Uganda could access life-saving protection and assistance services.

The most important factor for Uganda's progressive refugee policy, however, is the close cooperation and partnerships with the UNHCR organizations NGO's, civic society, international organizations and the Uganda Government. To give you one example: with UNHCR's support, the Government registers and issues civil identity documents to individual refugees; decides on asylum applications and appeals; deploys civil servants, health workers and teachers to refugee settlements; and contributes medical supplies and staff to refugee operations. Also important are regional diplomatic and military efforts to re-establish peace, security and stability.

Regarding the benefits from refugees to the Ugandan economy, I should like to mention that refugees are gaining financial independence because of my country's progressive 2006 Refugee Act, which allows refugees to work, travel and access public services - including education.

A recent study found that over half of the refugees are self-employed, operating small businesses, selling goods as informal vendors, or engaging in trade. Many of them pay taxes and also pay some other required dues by the local municipalities and that revenue goes back to the state.

I would like to mention though, that Uganda's welcoming policies for refugees weren't founded on the economic benefits – it began as a moral obligation. Many senior Ugandan officials, including President Yoweri Museveni, were at one point asylum seekers during past conflicts in the country. By having an accepting attitude toward refugees it opened the door to economic possibilities.

The measurable effects on host communities are nicely demonstrated by a recent initiative by the OPM, UNHCR and WFP when they signed a landmark self-reliance agreement for the benefit of thousands of refugees and host community farmers.

Through a Memorandum of Understanding some 17,500 refugees and Ugandans in and around the refugee settlements of Rwamwanja and Kyangwali will receive assistance with land for their use, community infrastructure, modern agricultural technologies, and training in agricultural skills, business skills and post-harvest crop loss reduction.

One of the key objectives is to assist refugees and host communities in becoming self-reliant and to strengthen their socio-economic resilience. This can take many forms, whether it be tending to livestock, cultivating fisheries or, as in this case, agricultural production. The enhanced economic prosperity this brings helps to foster co-operation and peaceful coexistence between refugees and their host communities.

It is my view that an economically empowered refugee is beneficial to the national economy and as a Nation we should work towards this. I believe it is imperative for the partners in refugee protection and management, nationally and internationally, to equally prioritize availing resources for refugee protection in Africa. The African refugee should not be forgotten because of the many refugee crises around the world.

When we collaborate together against the cancers of war and persecution, and manage displacement crises together, we give refugees and their host communities the chance to live in stability, prosperity and peace. Today we plant seeds; tomorrow we reap the harvests of improved food quality and economic affluence at a household level.

For Ugandans and refugees alike, more parents will be able to send their kids to school, more will be able to afford their healthcare treatment and medicines, and more families will enjoy the benefits of financial security.

As a final thought and in the spirit of sustainability, I believe we should use the experiences and practices we gain from agriculture, market support and post-harvest loss reduction programmes to support refugees and host communities elsewhere on the African continent to provide lasting opportunities for refugees and host communities to increase their incomes, boost their agricultural production and improve access to markets.