

REFUGEES AND LOCALS: AN INCOMPATIBLE PAIR?

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Introduction

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)¹ in its efforts to find lasting solutions for refugees is concerned that the current repatriation of refugees be coupled with sustainable reintegration. This becomes very real in the context of peace initiatives in neighbouring Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, from where refugees have sought asylum in Zambia. This paper focuses on the human dimension whereby refugees are empowered to contribute to lasting peace both in their homelands and in the region.

Who are refugees?

Before entering into a discussion regarding compatibility, it may be useful to understand who we are talking about.

Refugees are persons who have had to flee their homeland for fear of persecution or discrimination and have sought shelter and asylum from a neighbouring country.² They are covered by legal international instruments which protect them from being sent back to the situation from which they have fled. This discussion, however, will not focus on refugees' legal status but rather on refugees as human beings; as persons in need of understanding from the local population among whom they have sought refuge.

Very often the people among whom they seek refuge are relatives and friends; they often speak the same language, eat the same food, follow the same religion and observe similar cultural practices. How are they different and what makes them different?

Differences can be many, if only to prevent people from sharing scarce resources that puts a strain on a fragile economy. In order to support the governments of such countries, the UNHCR provides assistance and seeks international support to buffer the shock of receiving thousands of people across borders in a short space of time, providing them with hospitality and giving them a means to stay alive.

Visible and invisible differences

While there do not seem to be any visible differences there are deeper distinctions that may not be obvious. Every refugee who has fled his/her country leaving heart and home behind has suffered grave losses of home, family, livelihood, property and, above all, has lost a sense of identity as a citizen of a country. In all this pain there is a sense of helplessness at the overall madness which they find themselves a part of. Refugees in modern warfare have not been spared the violence of war that has included innocent civilians, women and children. They do not know the cause of the violence they are being subjected to or the agenda they are the unwilling participants of.

The feelings that are generated in this context are those of anger, hatred and often revenge. Time, the great healer, often merely dulls the edge of these feelings but they are never far from the surface and can resurrect with the slightest provocation. These negative feelings do not simply vanish. They need to be addressed and handled in a manner that is healing, and they need to be replaced with positive feelings of love and peace.

Is it possible to forget having had to kill one's own parents, spouse or child? Is it possible to forget the day you were hounded from your home without being allowed to collect your family? In this context, loss of belongings is the least consideration.

Refugees at times withdraw into themselves as they fear interacting with others whom they do not know and can hardly trust. This breakdown of trust is one of the biggest challenges when dealing with refugees. Rebuilding trust is therefore an important part of the rehabilitation process. The experiences of fear and disillusionment which led to their exile mark refugees more than the physical hurt or damage they may have undergone. If not handled carefully and sensitively, these invisible wounds can flare up in unexpected violence at any time and in unanticipated circumstances.

Cross-cultural differences can also be the cause of prejudice and bias. These can be based on superficial behaviour such as manner of speech, dance, music, dress and food habits. While these may seem superficial they can cause serious problems in interpersonal relations, both in the camps and with the locals.

The Zambia case

Zambia, a peaceful country, has a refugee policy that is not only enlightened and sensitive but has given refugees a chance to restart their blighted lives in a peaceful environment devoid of upheavals and sudden attacks.

- Zambia has offered agricultural land to refugees. This has provided refugees with a means of livelihood and has consequently gone some way to restoring their human dignity. Refugees have become involved in

agricultural and other pursuits, allowing them to meet their own needs as well as the needs of the surrounding population.

- Zambia has made an effort to provide refugees with opportunities for a normal life. Schooling is provided for children of primary school age and support is given to a few who are in secondary school and even at higher levels of education. Allowing refugees and local children to learn in the same schools helps them to mix, to discover commonalities and to establish bonds of friendship. In two settlements the government runs schools that cater for both refugees and local students.
- Health services in the camps are made available to the local population and eventually will be handed over to the government to provide services to both refugees and locals alike.
- Training, to which locals and refugees are invited to attend, is organised on issues of concern, such as HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases.
- Shared celebrations for both locals and refugees are held on occasions such as International Women's Day, World Refugee Day, Francophone Week and others. These occasions create common memories and bring people together for no other reason than the joy of celebration. Refugees and locals are bonded in common memories of events they can look back on with joy.
- Music has its own charm and refugees have found a way to express their hearts' desires through music; both plaintive and inspiring. The local population has found this to be a good medium of communication and refugee bands often entertain at local gatherings.
- Women as the bearers and preservers of life have a natural investment in peace.³ Empowering women to take on decision making roles is a way to ensure that peace has a fair chance. The UNHCR has made a commitment to refugee women worldwide and ensures that women's opinions and inputs are taken seriously in the communities in which they live. This is a crucial part of the work of the UNHCR and its partners in Zambia.

Perceptions of assistance

The UNHCR and its partners seek to provide assistance that matches the standard of living of the local population. However, refugees with all their problems are often perceived by the local population to be a privileged group which has won favour with the international community that provides them with food and other basic amenities.

Sadly, this assistance is not seen as a way of supporting the government, ensuring that the local population is not deprived of its resources. As a result, this perception can breed hatred, envy and resentment towards the refugee population, who are at times blamed for all society's ills, including criminal activities.

Refugees have to be assisted to understand their environment and the laws that govern the land. They also have to learn skills and ways of coping with hatred, not only in themselves but from the unmerited negative emotions of others. This knowledge and skill is important for their survival.

The pursuit of peace

“War springs from the mind and heart, and so must peace.” Peace cannot come from a heart wounded and torn by memories of hatred and with vows of revenge; peace can only come from hearts where healing has taken place and where justice, tempered by mercy, has been given a fair chance to blossom. This is no easy task, and to attain this end refugees have to be helped to replace painful memories with positive joyful experiences. They have to be helped to acquire new skills; not only vocational but also human relationship skills which enable people who are different to live together and to share a common humanity. In these efforts it is vital that refugees are not seen as helpless victims and as a national liability, but rather as human beings who can be challenged to rise above themselves and their past and to start life afresh.

Moreover, the UNHCR has a great interest in ensuring that refugees live in peace and harmony with those around them. This is not merely to make their work easier, but rather that the refugee situation be used as a laboratory to change old patterns and to allow people to live meaningful lives, where problems are addressed and resolved through dialogue and mutual understanding. Prevention is better than cure and early signs of impending conflict need to be recognised and dealt with even before they present themselves as problems.

Collaboration is the key in this effort. The UNHCR, its partners and government are aware that they must set an example of cooperation and collaboration before they can demand such behaviour from refugees.

Preparation for repatriation

The peace initiatives in Angola, Rwanda and the DRC have suggested that refugees can now return home safely and in dignity to begin life in their homeland. Refugees have a longing to be home and now that the moment has arrived, they delight in their impending return.

However, the logistics of returning home, difficult as it may seem, is only the beginning of their struggle. Refugees must be prepared for what is to come after

they have set foot in their homeland. They are returning to a country that has been ravaged by war, a country torn apart by civil and military strife; people they knew have died, the infrastructure has been destroyed and life is hard.

The food and support the refugees received in the camps will come to an end and they will have to fend for themselves. They will have to live with their own countrymen who may not see them in a positive light, but may view them as those who ran away, who received help from the international community and who are now returning to receive benefits once again. In Angola, there are also internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are in similar circumstances to the returning refugees. Any assistance provided to refugees will be seen in a similar way to the assistance received in exile and will bring about similar reactions.

Refugees have often spent so much time in exile that on their return they feel like strangers in their own country. They are perceived as a privileged group who are now seeking privileges once again.

In order to help refugees cope with possible difficulties on their return they are issued with certificates of attendance to enable them to continue their studies in their home country, as well as with documentation regarding their health status. They are trained regarding the landmine situation in their country and the precautions and actions they should take as a result. They are also given relevant information about their home country and the locations they are returning to, as well as an orientation on human relations and on peaceful methods for resolving conflict.

Peace and conflict resolution

Nothing can bring one peace except oneself. If refugees are to benefit from peace they must be a party to creating it. With this in mind, a peace and conflict resolution training programme has been undertaken to help refugees to live in the camps in harmony. This programme also took on the tenor of preparing refugees for repatriation. Through a carefully planned and structured programme jointly conceived with the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation (MEF), refugees from the Meheba Refugee Settlement were trained in the elements of peace and the skills needed to make it a reality. Sixty-seven refugees were trained, representing Angolans, Burundians, Rwandese and Congolese. It was conducted with the help of interpreters who assisted in translating the messages into Portuguese, French, Swahili and Mubundu.

The idea was to create a base of people who could later train others. The training was not only based on theory but had a practical component as well, which was carried out between sessions. Representatives were chosen for their human qualities and for the trust they had generated among their fellow refugees. Women and men were selected and age was no barrier.

After the training, refugees reported on their ability to help their colleagues resolve conflicts. Selections were made for the next phase and a group of men

and women were sent to other Angolan camps in Mayukwayukwa and Nagweshi. They were monitored by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), which has programmes in Nagweshi and so were familiar with the refugees. The MEF, with the help of a donation from the Belgian Government, later conducted a similar programme in the Congolese camps in Kala and Mwange. The refugees from Meheba continued to be the trainers, whose skills were greatly appreciated by their fellow refugees in the other camps.

The refugees were taught to understand how conflict is generated and what processes need to be engaged in, in order to resolve conflict. Skills such as negotiation, listening, inclusion, compromise, empathy and observation were taught and practised through the processes of role playing, note taking and self-awareness training. Through exercises, refugees were also taught to identify potential conflict and what needed to be done to avert such conflict.

The programme was tailor-made to suit the needs of refugees and to address the problems they face. The camp situation was used as the laboratory for this training, but it opened their minds and hearts to what would need to be done in similar situations elsewhere. The refugees brought to the training their fears of what they anticipated would happen to them upon their return home: their fears of dealing with the authorities who had been the cause of their exile; the neighbours who would reject them; the wife who may have found another husband, and so on. It was apparent that while they longed to return home the refugees feared how they would make it in the long run. The refugees were serious learners as they had a stake in the learning.

From reports received, the refugees took it upon themselves to resolve conflicts within the camp and with neighbouring Zambians. Problems relating to cattle grazing on maize fields were sorted out through dialogue and mutual compromise. Dialogue was also established with authority figures on issues of concern. This was a big change from the belligerent attitudes seen earlier.

The message was also carried back to Angola when refugees returned, only to discover that their homes and land had been taken over by others. Instead of entering into conflict, the refugees individually agreed that they would ask for alternative plots of land to live on. Sharing with others in need was also an important component; for example, a young woman took in an older woman whose family had died. The quiet, gentle and understanding attitude of the returnees has been a real asset in the repatriation and reintegration process, and these refugees have helped to dispel some of the misgivings of the local population. By their attitude they have been able to create a base for dialogue and understanding. This approach needs to be supported if reintegration is to be sustainable.

Some of the refugees who had undergone the training also volunteered to conduct training for the local population and to share their vision of peaceful coexistence and the benefits thereof. They have been encouraged in this effort by the JRS, which is also working in Angola.

Sustainable reintegration and leadership

Sustainable reintegration is of vital concern to the UNHCR, which sees the return of refugees as a new beginning. Together with the food and non-food items given to refugees upon their return, they must be helped in their efforts to become accepted by the local population and to begin to live as responsible citizens of Angola. Similar efforts will need to be undertaken with regard to returnees to the DRC and Rwanda.

While formal leadership training has not been undertaken, the process of working with refugees has indicated the qualities needed to lead others. This is a difficult task as the refugees do not see leaders as those who take into account the needs of other people. Concepts such as sacrifice and self-effacement seem unreal, idealistic and impractical. However, one can only reinforce genuine concern for others and reward such behaviour.

This aspect is essential for sustainable reintegration and if one is to re-establish faith and confidence in the system. Refugees are the potential future leaders of their countries and it is vital that they have the right attitudes and approaches to good governance.

The Zambia Initiative

The Zambia Initiative is an innovative measure to support the areas where refugees live – particularly in the Western Zone, the poorest in Zambia – and to integrate the interests of refugees into long-term national development plans. These measures target the local communities in refugee hosting areas in order to improve the living conditions of both the refugees and the locals.

In this respect the Government of Zambia has set a commendable precedent in Southern Africa. The initiative demonstrates that refugees are not just helpless victims but can be productive members of society and can contribute to the local community. The initiative targets some areas of major concern, such as education, agriculture, basic infrastructure, health and vocational training.

The Zambia Initiative has at its base the common human existence of refugees and locals and areas of mutual concern. It aims to bring people from the two communities together, to seek common solutions and to find ways to learn to work together.

Refugee and local participation in activities of common concern is essential if the programme is to succeed. In this regard, the UNHCR, its implementing partners, refugees and locals have been making a major effort to work through biases and prejudices and to ensure that this government-led initiative becomes a viable proposition.

Political parties cannot arrange peace and treaties alone; it has to be supported at grassroots level and by people who know its value and the skills and art to achieving peace. Refugees are not static entities; they are mobile

human beings capable of great good, and will hopefully all return to their countries of origin with the knowledge and skills to combat the evil effects of war. An investment made in refugees will ensure a long-term investment in peace in the region.

Conclusion

The UNHCR considers refugees as a rich source of human potential and as positive contributors to society. By making an investment in refugees and by developing their inherent capacities, we are investing not just in their future but in our own.

Notes

- 1 The UNHCR is the UN organ entrusted with the protection and care of refugees worldwide.
- 2 A refugee is defined by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention, 6-10 September 1969, as: “Every person who owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or owing to such fear is unwilling to return to it.”
- 3 Respect our rights: Partnership for equality, report on the Dialogue with Refugee Women, Geneva, Switzerland 20–22 June 2001.