



## **A BRIEF ON THE SITUATION in SOUTH SUDAN, DRC AND SOMALIA**

### **Current situation of Somalia, DRC and South Sudan**

Somalia, DRC and South Sudan continue to experience massive displacement caused by conflict. Most refugees from these countries settle in neighboring countries, making the East African region one of the main recipients worldwide of people affected by conflict. This has contributed to serious human rights violations, especially against women, girls and children who constitute the majority of those displaced and are most vulnerable in such situations.

### **Uganda's contribution towards refugees**

Uganda has remained unique with its “open door policy” for refugees, which allows refugees to enjoy relative freedom of movement, education and employment. Uganda has championed an integrated settlement approach in which refugees and host communities coexist and share common services. Uganda continues to be the largest refugee hosting country in Africa, and is currently home to over 1 million refugees from South Sudan; 276,570 from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); and close to 37,100 from Somalia.

### **AWYAD's contribution**

African Women and Youth Action for Development (AWYAD) is a humanitarian and development NGO in Uganda, working to respond to the needs of women, girls, children and other vulnerable people among refugee and host communities. AWYAD is currently implementing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and protection programs among South Sudanese and Congolese refugees in the northern and western parts of the country.

### **Challenges, experiences and gaps**

The ongoing crises in South Sudan, Somalia and DRC have resulted in a protracted refugee situation in Uganda. The long-term support needed by refugees poses significant challenges to the continuation of Uganda's progressive refugee policy. Uganda's refugee response is currently overstretched, underfunded and requires more regional and international support. The situation is further exacerbated by low development in the areas hosting refugees, which has led to increased competition for resources between the two communities. With little likelihood of

refugee repatriation anytime soon, this competition poses serious threats to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. It is essential that Uganda receive more support so that the vital work Ugandan communities do to resettle and integrate refugees can continue.

Despite the majority of refugees from the three countries being women and children, there are few gender-focused humanitarian programs. Gender and protection programming is chronically underfunded despite the fact that women's empowerment is a strong tool for social transformation in these refugee populations. Women play an integral role in restoring families, communities and nations after conflicts, yet women are not receiving adequate support to help prepare them for this task. This is a missed opportunity, given the evidence that gender equality is the best predictor of peace – more so than a country's level of democracy, wealth, or ethnoreligious makeup.<sup>1</sup>

The level of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) among refugees and host communities is steadily increasing, predominantly affecting women and girls. Although SGBV is on the rise, it is still vastly underreported as these crimes are deeply tied to shame for women in many cultures. In order to reduce the frequency, impact and stigma of SGBV, women's rights organizations need increased support and funding to empower and educate their communities, and to challenge norms, attitudes and behaviours on this serious but taboo issue.

High birth rates are especially prominent among refugees, which is a result of child marriages and a lack of alternative education options for over-aged children who are out of school - together with cultural practices. There is an urgent need to scale up reproductive health and rights programs in Uganda in order to reduce the pressure on the already strained social services. Again, it is vital that women's rights organizations receive more support so that they can continue to work to transform cultural practices and empower women and girls.

Although all refugees face challenges, refugees from South Sudan, who contribute to over two thirds of the total refugees hosted in Uganda, are the most vulnerable refugees in Uganda. South Sudan is a young nation with weak structures and systems. The refugees from South Sudan have already faced numerous hardships and tend to have few employable skills when they settle in the northern region of Uganda - one of the poorest in the country. Most have low levels of education, and their children need special support before they can integrate into Ugandan schools. Tribal clashes are frequent, even once the refugees have settled in Uganda. Women and children are extremely vulnerable as SGBV is very prominent in their culture due to traditional cultural norms and practices. Local organizations, who understand South Sudan's history and culture, must be key players in the refugee response. Because they understand culture and context, and are embedded within communities, they can deliver programs – like SGBV awareness, or community dialogues to promote social cohesion – more successfully than many international actors.

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<sup>1</sup> V.M. Hudson. (2012, April 24). What Sex Means for World Peace. Retrieved October 2 2018, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/24/what-sex-means-for-world-peace/>

## What Canada can do:

- Canada should advocate for, and fund, more gender-focused programs in Uganda, as women make up the majority of refugees and are most affected by the crisis.
- Canada should provide more multi-year funding and support long-term humanitarian interventions in countries like Uganda - to alleviate the burden of protracted refugee crises.
- Canada should support the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in creating a simpler integration process for refugees into host communities.
- Canada should fund democratic governance and civic education projects, to prepare refugees to lead the work of restoring their communities and nations after conflict and ensure lasting peace and stability.
- Canada should support the creation of a coordination mechanism that works with all the humanitarian actors across the region to more effectively plan and respond to refugee influxes. This would empower the East African community to address the refugee and security challenges it is facing, and support neighbouring countries in crisis (including DRC, Somalia and South Sudan).
- Canada should work to strengthen the capacity of local organizations and local governments to provide sustainable humanitarian assistance to displaced persons. In particular, local women's rights organizations should be key partners in addressing the many gender issues (SGBV, early marriage, reproductive health) that are affecting refugee women and girls.
- Canada should ensure that funding mechanisms are available and open to respond on an ongoing basis to protracted and displacement-related crises. Timely and needs-based humanitarian assistance is critical to avoiding frustration and poor coping mechanisms among the refugees. Coping mechanisms to deal with economic hardship, such as child marriage, trafficking or sex work, often expose women and girls to SGBV.