



# *Refugee Law Project*

*Faculty of Law, Makerere University*



## **Welcome remarks on the occasion of Refugee Law Project's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner, Thursday 23 April 2010**

*Dr Chris Dolan, Director*

- Guest of Honour, the Minister for Relief and Disaster Preparedness, Professor Tarsis Kabwegyere
- His Lordship, Justice Ogoola
- The Dean, Faculty of Law, Mr Ben Twinomugisha
- The President of the Democratic Party, Hon. Norbert Mao
- Refugee Leaders
- Development partners
- Representatives and members of the donor community
- Members of the diplomatic corps
- Civil society, faith leaders and the media,
- Fellow activists, colleagues, distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

It gives me immense pleasure, as Director of the Refugee Law Project, and on behalf of my colleagues, to welcome you to this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner. Working on these issues is not always a joyful task, but today is really a day of celebration.

When we speak of children, we think in terms of the Infant Mortality Rate, which refers to how many children out of every thousand children die before they reach the age of 5 years.

The IMR for Civil Society Organisations is not known, but it is nonetheless an achievement to be amongst those organisations that did not die before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, and, even better, made it all the way to our tenth birthday.

Having made it thus far, it is clear that we are entering into our organisation's adolescence and puberty, and quite possibly some rites of passage. You might think ten is kind of young for this, but let me just hope that RLP is an early developer.



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Once a child enters adolescence a number of questions spring into his or her parents' minds. Some of RLP's parents are in the room with us tonight, so I want to try and guess what those questions might be and try and reassure them and all other friends in the room as to the answers.

As the child gets to puberty, a lot of things happen; there are growth spurts, clothes no longer fit, breasts and facial hair emerge, some kids become somehow uncoordinated and a little clumsy. In the RLP we see all these happening. If our building is our shirt, skirt and trousers, then it is clear that we have outgrown it. We have tried extending it, but we've run out of material, and we need a new one.

I won't try to identify RLP's breasts and facial hair, but certainly our growth spurts do create occasional moments of uncoordinated movement and a resultant appearance of clumsiness. I am quietly confident however, that we shall emerge from these growth phases with a body that is strong, well built, coordinated and harmonious.

When a child becomes an adolescent and starts to explore outside the parameters of parental control, there is inevitable anxiety about what kinds of friends they will make, what kinds of relationships they will get into, whether they will learn to recognise when a relationship has run its course, and so on. When it comes to RLP, a lot of friendships have been established, some with local kids on the block like ACTV and Hope After Rape, some with visiting students like Institute of Development Studies and City University in London. When it comes to the organisations we hang out with, I should highlight the Coalition Against Torture, the Coalition on Reconciliation in Uganda, and the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Constitutional Law, and leave you to judge for yourselves whether you think we have fallen in with the right or the wrong crowds.



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I had thought of continuing to explore the analogy by looking at the question posed by any anxious parent when their child first goes to secondary school; will s/he be able to handle the bullies? In my experience the best way to handle bullies is to let them bully to the point where they think you are a compliant victim, and then one day turn round unexpectedly and give them a dose of the same. I think RLP has ably followed that kind of strategy and has not let itself be bullied excessively.

Then there is the more complex matter of whether an adolescent is making the right choice of subjects at school; translated for the purposes of my analogy this evening, is RLP developing the right kind of activities and sub-projects to help it get to where it needs to go.

Given that we started out purely and simply as legal aid for refugees and asylum seekers, should we really be teaching English for Adults to our clients? What has transitional justice got to do with refugees? Can't we work on rights without getting into the messy business of sexual rights? Is it really necessary to get to the bottom of what happens to people when they get deported? And what on earth have the problems facing Karamoja got to do with forced migration?

These are all questions which have been put to us and which, indeed, we have also asked each other. I think it is a tribute to the genius of the RLP's original vision and mission statement that we have been able to broaden our scope in the ways mentioned above as well as several others, without compromising our fundamental commitments to the rights of forced migrants and their hosts. It is also a reflection of our belief that working with people cannot be done if not done in a holistic fashion.

A particular question which has troubled us is, should we be changing our name. After many discussions and much advice, we have decided *not* to change it. Instead we shall add a suffix which clarifies our scope, as you will see when we show our video:



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*A centre for justice and forced migrants*

I think this effectively signals that our core has remained solid, while our scope has indeed broadened.

There are many other questions an anxious parent may ask (will he behave appropriately in adult company? Will she have any children? Etc etc), but I shall end with the one which seems to me to be key; after all these processes, will she be her own person? While also inheriting at least some of the strengths of her parents?

Which brings me to three of the RLP's 'parents', who also happen to be three of the bosses I have had in my own career. I'd like to start with Barbara Harrell-Bond. For anybody in the field of refugee studies, Barbara is a must-know, without a doubt the mother of refugee studies as we know it. For me personally, Barbara's book, 'Imposing Aid', taught me the importance of getting the title right. Those two words tell you telegraphically all that the book is about; to get the details you have to read a further 500 pages!

Turning to Prof Sylvia Tamale, Dean of the Faculty of Law at the time of my own appointment in 2006. When I was offered this job I was working in the UN in DRC. I have to confess to taking two months to decide on whether or not to accept the offer, particularly as I had a competing offer from UNDP. One of the factors which decided me was when I thought through who my boss would be in UNDP, and who it would be at RLP.

I went onto the net and googled both of them; the person in UNDP had about five entries, all of which turned out to be re-statements of a very platitudinous review of how UNDP was pursuing the MDGs in country X. When I googled Sylvia, on the other hand, I recognised that in her I would have a boss who speaks out on things that really matter to real people, as opposed to things that are calculated to make states feel good about



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themselves. That is what swung my decision in favour of RLP, and four years later I cannot say that I have ever regretted my decision.

Turning to Mr Ben Twinomugisha, Dean of the Faculty of Law at this point in time, I also wish to salute you. I would describe you as the father who observes from a distance, intervening only at the most critical junctures. For the adolescent we are becoming, this is the ideal kind of parent, and I thank you for your wise words at those crucial junctures.

I would also wish to salute my predecessors, without whom RLP would never have made it to this age; Professor Joe Oloka-Onyango, who gave the initial go-ahead and acted as interim director at an early stage in the RLP's life, Pam Reynell, our very first director who you will also see on the anniversary video, Mr (soon to be Dr) Zachary Lomo who brought his personality, personal experience as a refugee and profound combination of humanity and knowledge of the law to bear on shaping the RLP to the point where I took over: we owe you all a lifelong debt.

There are many other friends of the RLP in the room tonight, and time does not allow me to thank you one by one, much though I would wish to do so. I would, however, like to make an exception for Norbert Mao, formerly MP Gulu district, then LCV Gulu district, now President of the Democratic Party; you have always encouraged us to shine a light into those places which are dark, and for that, Mr President of the Democratic Party, we thank you, and for honouring our invitation tonight, I thank you.

As I move to closing, I would like to say that the health of an organisation resides not just in its finances, but also in its client base. I would like to thank all the representatives of the different refugee communities with which we work for their considerable contributions to our mutual successes to date. For Somalis, Ali Jama  
For Ethiopians, Amari Dure



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For Rwandans, Mukamusoni Immaculate & Jean Claude Kamayirese  
For Burundians, Pascal Nkuzimana and Liliane Sinawarane  
For Eritreans, Berahani Tesfai  
And last but not least, for the Congolese Community, Kazadi William & Kabali Dorothee.

From the urban IDP communities: James Okullo, Matthew Okot, Alex Olobo and Hellen.

And turning to the sixty five staff, volunteers, interns and associates of RLP, of whom one quarter are themselves refugees, I would like to recognise my colleagues in the different departments and unit.

Administration  
Education & Training  
Legal Aid  
Psychosocial Unit  
Community Interpreters  
Research and Advocacy

Moses Chrispus Okello: Beyond Juba Project Co-ordinator  
Salima Namusobya: Grants Manager  
Eunice Owiny: Senior Counsellor  
Godwin Buwa: Legal Advisor  
Elvis Wanaume: English For Adults  
Dan Neumann, for pioneering our video advocacy work in 2008 and 2009.

Let me close by thanking you all again for your presence here tonight, and wishing you an enjoyable evening.