

Host Must Work #WithRefugees in Protecting the Environment

World Refugee Day 2019

Since June 20 was declared World Refugee Day by the UN General Assembly in 2000 the number of refugees and other forced migrants has escalated dramatically. 105 years since the World Day of Migrants and Refugees was instituted by Pope Pius X in 1914, and 68 years since the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees was established, Uganda is currently hosting 1,257,729 refugees and asylum seekers (figures as of 30 April 2019) – the highest in Africa and equivalent to the population of Mauritius.

This year's theme, "Take a Step #WithRefugees - Protect the Environment", which is being commemorated at Alaba Primary School Football Ground in the country's largest refugee settlement, Bidibidi in Yumbe District, is very timely!

1. In addition to considering the impact of large-scale influxes of refugees on the environment, the world is finally recognising that our failure to protect the environment is becoming a major new force in generating refugee flows
2. The world has just commemorated World Environment Day with the theme #BeatAirPollution, in recognition of the fact that attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is threatened by rapidly and negatively changing environmental conditions
3. It capitalises on the fact that 60 percent of Uganda's refugee population are children, an age group that easily adopts to new ideas including tree planting
4. It also resonates with the focus during yesterday's International day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict with focus on the importance of survivor-centred approaches.



Gravaria, Mahogany and Musizi tree seedlings that were planted in Katuliikre Catholic Parish land, Kiryandongo District



Mangrove seedlings that were planted by Refugee Law Project staff on Bududa land, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

Refugees are among the 3.8 million people who die every year as a result of exposure to harmful products from dirty stoves and fuels. These deaths could be prevented if refugees and other poverty-stricken communities living on relief hand-outs had access to alternative fuel for heating and cooking. Due to unavailability and/or unaffordability of alternative sources of energy including electricity, over 90 per cent of total energy used by hosts, refugees and asylum seekers' households in Uganda comes from biomass – predominantly from firewood and charcoal.

What affordable alternatives do refugees and hosts have for heating and cooking? Studies have shown that over 43 per cent of charcoal is produced from privately owned forests, that 41 per cent of charcoal producers are engaged in full-time charcoal production, and that levels of charcoal consumption cannot be supplied sustainably. Gas appears not to be a direct substitute for charcoal as LPG price reduction has not yielded significant reduction in demand and consumption of charcoal. Before we condemn users of fuelwood, it's worth re-echoing that whereas poor households contribute to degradation and usage of 'dirty' fuel, 49 per cent of institutions in Uganda including schools and gazetted detention places also consume wood and charcoal (see National Charcoal Survey for Uganda 2015).

Just like their hosts, refugees are (in some instances) engaged in labour intensive commercial production of charcoal and firewood using traditional kilns. This negatively impacts on human health and contributes to the rapid depletion of Uganda's forest cover. Current mitigation measures include 'developed charcoal production technologies'. The Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD) has proposed 'improved and portable' metal kilns as one of the #GoGreenCharcoalProject. But these are unaffordable and inaccessible in equal measures to some refugees and hosts (National Charcoal Survey report for Uganda (2015)).



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Refugee Law Project Kiryandongo staff monitoring the tree plantation in Katulikire Catholic Parish after weeding

As a human rights organisation that has since its inception been working directly with thousands of forced migrants including refugees, asylum seekers, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and deportees, and envisioning a context where forced migrants lead dignified lives irrespective of their legal status, we honour their courage. We dedicate this day to all those who have dared perilous journeys in quest for safety, as well as those with fingers tightly crossed as they trek international borders in search for protection from unspeakable acts of abuse, human rights violations, and survivors of natural hazards such as the Bududa mudslides.

This day serves as a special reminder about the generosity of those who have sacrificed the little they have to support refugees. Specifically, we send our gratitude to refugee hosting districts and communities in Uganda – without whom refugees and asylum seekers would not have easily found safe havens. Supported by the National and District Development Plans and the Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA) which decentralised refugee management to respective hosting districts, the real heroes and heroines worth appreciating on this day are members of refugee hosting districts who have, without hesitation, generously offered their land (most of it customary land) to host and support refugees as well as accommodate Government's development

projects. Indeed, this invaluable generosity is what makes Uganda's refugee management policies stand out and

leads to them being lauded world over.

It's clear that addressing climate change requires a whole society approach; no one can be left behind. Engaging refugees and hosts in environmental protection is vital but needs to go hand-in-hand with relevant Environmental Behavioural Change Communication (BCC), mass sensitisation, and policy and legislative reforms.

As we commemorate World Refugee Day 2019, and as one of the actors actively involved in tree planting in Adjumani, Kiryandongo, and Lamwo district, we ask government, UN organisations, Civil Society Organisation, (CSOs) private sectors, academia, diplomatic missions, donor community, and the general public to:

- » Recognise that protecting the environment is a shared responsibility of all, both the citizens of the host country, and the refugees who depend on their hospitality
- » Support environmentalists to closely engage and work with leadership of refugee communities in seeking culturally embraced and sustainable approaches to climate change mitigation. Given that the average number of years spent in displacement has increased from 18 to 21, environmentalist concerned about sustainability of climate change programmes must engage refugees in achieving long-term programmes.
- » Rethink alternative sources of livelihood especially those that are forest-based products for refugees and hosts so as to tactfully engage on environmental protection. This requires both a needs assessment but also capacity assessment of refugees and hosts on resilience and livelihood strategies.
- » Engage community-based structures including environmental committees (LC structures), Refugee Welfare Committees, cultural and faith-based leaders among others on climate change and peaceful co-existence programmes for refugees and hosts.
- » Support refugee and host communities to raise nurseries and seedlings with which they can distribute and plant collectively.
- » Encourage, support, and proactively engage younger generations in discussions related to forced displacement and climate change through school debates, study tours and exchange visits.
- » Promote community information and awareness raising sessions on forced displacements and climate change. Whereas a lot has since been done, more factsheets on policies, ordinances, and practices in languages friendly to refugees and host communities can offer much assistance informing and mobilising refugees and hosts.

Nice commemorations!

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