

# MITIGATING VULNERABILITY: Non-formal education for refugee youths in South Africa

---

KOFI POKU QUAN-BAFFOUR<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article proposes non-formal education (NFE) programmes as an important strategy for making refugee youths less vulnerable. NFE has the potential to ensure that young people are useful to both themselves and their host country. For the past 20 years, ethnic, political and socioeconomic conflict have brought instability to a number of African countries. This has resulted in the mass movement of millions of youths across borders to escape compulsory conscription, starvation and death. Stable countries on the continent have thus become safe havens for most refugee youths, with South Africa receiving more than its share of refugees from conflict zones. Since 1994, when the country returned to the international community, South Africa has opened its doors to thousands of asylum seekers: most of these are youths with little or no formal education and training. Their lack of knowledge and skills not only makes them vulnerable, but also difficult to integrate into the socioeconomic culture of the host country. The article advocates equipping refugee youths with basic knowledge and skills through non-formal education programmes, to enable them to create work, increase their self-confidence and dignity, and empower them to play a meaningful role in South Africa's socioeconomic development. The article points out that ignoring uneducated, unskilled and unemployable refugee youths may not be in the best socioeconomic interest of the host country.

## Introduction

The term 'refugee' may refer to an individual who runs away from a war or conflict situation and seeks asylum in a safer environment – usually in a foreign country. For the past two decades, tribal or ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and political and socioeconomic upheavals in some African countries have resulted in the mass movement of millions of youths across the borders of their home countries. These youths might leave their countries of origin to escape compulsory conscription, torture, starvation and death. The more stable countries on the continent have become safe havens for refugee youths from conflict zones, and South Africa has more than its share of asylum seekers. Since 1994, when the country returned to the international fold, it has opened its door:



to thousands of refugee youths from near and far. Most refugee youths have very little or no education or any form of training, which makes integration into the socioeconomic life of the host country very difficult.

In describing education, Christian (2007:91) says it is an organised and sustained instruction designed to communicate a combination of knowledge, skills and understanding which is valuable for all life's activities. Refugee youths usually lack the relevant knowledge and skills, hence they are vulnerable in an alien environment. Shah (2007:52) affirms that refugee youths are marginalised or isolated young people who often fall outside networks of structured associational activity. These young people could be supported to enter into fruitful engagements within their neighbourhoods through structured activities offered by non-formal education. Kirk and Cassity (2007:51) point out that the emerging field of education in emergencies is premised on the fact that education is the right of all children, and for those in situations of crisis and conflict, a right that critically meets short- and long-term needs. Unfortunately, this is one of the rights denied to many children in conflict-affected contexts. The denial of this particular 'enabling right' has multiple negative impacts for refugee youths – millions of displaced youths might not have access to education, because education has not been considered a sector for humanitarian assistance and has not been prioritised in emergency situations (Kirk and Cassity 2007).

This article advocates for non-formal education and training programmes for refugee youths in South Africa, to increase their confidence and dignity, and to enable them to work and play a meaningful role in the country's socioeconomic development. Since the world economy is based on relevant knowledge and skills it is crucial to equip uneducated and unskilled refugee youths with the type of education and training that would enable them to be useful to themselves and their host country. The article argues that accepting thousands of uneducated, unskilled and unemployable refugee youths into the country and then ignoring them would not be in the best socioeconomic and political interest of South Africa. It is believed that non-formal education and training programmes for refugee youths may reduce poverty, deprivation, vulnerability and concomitant social vices such as drug peddling, prostitution, house breaking, mugging and even murder. The training of refugee youths through non-formal education could equip them with the skills to fend for themselves, and employ fellow refugees – or even some of the country's unemployed citizens.

### **Pushing factors and the plight of refugee youths**

In recent times millions of youths all over the world have crossed over to foreign countries as refugees. In Africa, a number of factors contribute to youths fleeing their countries of origin to become asylum seekers in unknown destinations. The major factors that push youths out of their home countries include ethnic conflicts, wars, political and

socioeconomic upheavals, traditional practices (such as forced marriage and female circumcision), forced labour and slavery.

The recent civil wars, political upheavals and ethnic conflicts in the Great Lakes Region involving the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan and Uganda, are cases in point. The conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan has claimed the lives of 600 000 people and destroyed one million homes (SABC 2/5/2009). Somalia, for example, has become a hot-bed of ethnic and religious militia operations since the 1980s, when the central government was toppled. Another example is the political decay in Zimbabwe, which has brought a once prosperous country to its knees. Ethnic and political conflicts and socioeconomic meltdowns such as these usually result in both the internal and external displacement of people.

There are some areas in Africa where forced marriages, female circumcision and domestic slavery may still be practised. In some African cultures, when a clan or family is indebted, children are used as surety. Children who stand surety may work as domestic servants until they are redeemed by the families through the settlement of the debt. This could mean many years of domestic service, and where the family fails to pay back the youths might not regain their freedom. Modern-day youths who regard these as outmoded customs look for ways to avoid them. The above factors (i.e. wars, ethnic conflicts, outmoded cultural practices) push youths out of their home countries to settle in stable countries in the region and beyond. The political and economic decay in Zimbabwe, for example, has forced thousands of youths – many of whom are uneducated, unskilled and therefore unemployable – out of the country to neighbouring countries, including South Africa. The few who might possess some relevant knowledge and skills may not obtain work permits to enable them work in the country, and they are therefore illegal migrants who risk arrest and deportation. Most asylum seekers live in poverty and could be vulnerable to anti-social activities such as drug peddling, prostitution, house breaking and very serious crimes like carjacking, bank robbery and murder. There are people who might take advantage of the situation to abuse, rob, injure, kill or report the youths to the police, who may arrest and keep them under appalling, harsh and inhumane conditions, pending deportation. Millions of rands of taxpayers' money might be spent annually on repatriating refugee youths, who usually find their way back to the country within days. One wonders whether the time is not ripe for the authorities to turn the situation into an advantage for both the country and the able-bodied refugee youths. One suggestion might be to use the funds wasted on unsuccessful repatriation efforts to provide refugee youths with skills which South Africa is in dire need of. In this way the refugee youths could compensate for the skills shortage in the country by participating in its socioeconomic activities.

### **Provision of relevant knowledge and skills for refugees: A justification**

The thousands of refugee youths in South Africa may be vulnerable when it comes to basic human needs such as shelter, food, clothing, health and safety. The country may have its own serious socioeconomic problems, however as a nation which fought for democracy and emerged from discrimination, a signatory to the 1951 United Nations' Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, South Africa should have the moral obligation to protect refugee youths against all kinds of discrimination, including lack of access to education and training. Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example, recognises the rights of the child to education, including higher education, on the basis of equal opportunity (Candappa 2000:2). This implies that refugee youths in South Africa should be afforded the right to learn, to pastoral support and to a learning environment where their abilities can be nurtured and developed to their full potential, to enable them to work and earn a living.

In the view of Mokwena (2007:38) young refugees probably face some of the hardest challenges in life, and are often viewed as vulnerable and therefore incapable of helping themselves. Kirk and Cassity (2007:50) add that young refugees worldwide are faced with complex challenges in attempting to access education. Many of them have little previous schooling, which may account for their limited knowledge of English when they arrive in the country. Most refugee youths view acquiring competency in English as crucial in their present lives, not only for work but also for self-confidence and social interaction (Candappa 2000:267). Many see education in emergency programmes as a critical intervention to support the cognitive, social and emotional development of youths affected by natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, or man-made crises such as conflict.

The universal assumption is that the family is the best environment for nurturing the growth and wellbeing of children, and that the family unit serves their best interests (Qingwen Xu 2005:759). However, in the wake of disasters such as floods, earthquakes, wild fires and political upheavals and wars, where many youths have been displaced and separated from their parents, it becomes crucial for the host country, the international community, non-governmental organisations, churches and individual community members to take up the challenge to mitigate the vulnerability of refugee youths through non-formal education programmes. In times of crisis, young people no longer have the benefit of being reared and exposed to secure environments and are often neglected and left to be raised on the streets. This strains the social fabric to breaking point, and fosters an environment that allows violence to grow and flourish (Bell 2007:113). The saying that the devil finds work for the idle applies here, which is why refugee youths should be engaged in relevant learning activities so as to be equipped with socioeconomic skills for decent living.

The provision of emergency education programmes for refugee youths is not a new venture: it dates back to World War II, when education was used as a mechanism for integration and identity formation for displaced youths. Teachers who were forced out of Germany during the war opened schools to support uprooted and confused children in their development of a new and complex identity in an alien environment (Feidel-Mertz and Hammel 2004:1). In recent years there has been growing recognition of the importance of education, and its potential to provide protection to some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Apart from using education to help them integrate into a new environment and form identities, most refugee youths might be physically strong but lack the knowledge and skills to work and earn a living. Lamenting the plight of refugee youths in general, Candappa (2000:266–267) report that many refugee youths have to endure unacceptable standards of living. This may be, to a greater extent, due to their apparent lack of knowledge and skills, or perhaps harassment from state agents who do not permit them to work. To improve their living conditions and reduce the possibility of them getting involved in antisocial activities it is crucial to equip refugee youths with the relevant socioeconomic skills and the necessary documents which may permit them to work. It is believed that once they are empowered with the necessary and relevant skills they may be able to find work or initiate their own entrepreneurial projects and fend for themselves. When they begin to earn an income, their standard of living should improve because they will be able to pay for decent accommodation, clothes, food and medicines.

The effort to mitigate the vulnerability of refugee youths through non-formal education should, however, not be the responsibility of the host country alone. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Commonwealth and other international and local organisations should team up with the South African government to equip refugee youths with the skills which are sought after by various sectors of the country's economy. In this way, both the host country and the refugee youths could, in the long run, benefit from non-formal education and training programmes. This measure may also reduce poverty, starvation, deprivation and concomitant social vices such as crime. Thus, the provision of relevant knowledge and skills and an opportunity to work could go a long way towards mitigating the vulnerability of refugee youths in the country. Again, when refugee youths are engaged in socioeconomic activities they may not get involved in criminal activities such as drug peddling, prostitution, robbery or mugging. Thus, by engaging in acceptable socioeconomic activities, refugee youths may not only create employment to improve themselves, but also the economy of the host country.

## **Strategies to mitigate vulnerability among refugee youths**

Refugee youths in South Africa come from diverse backgrounds that include Spanish-, Portuguese-, French- and English-speaking countries. While some youths have basic social communication and economic skills, many of them do not. This may, in part, be due to a lack of opportunity to attend school in their home country, or the inability to express themselves in basic English. Qingwen Xu (2005:759) reports that the US Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act of 2003 was enacted to reduce some of the barriers threatening immigrant and refugee children's wellbeing. The most serious of the barriers included limited proficiency in English, because of their diverse backgrounds. The language barrier makes it very difficult for some refugees to move freely, or to integrate into the social and economic life of the country. Educational programmes should, therefore, aim to help the uprooted and the confused develop a new identity and come to terms with an alien environment (Feidel-Mertz and Hammel 2004). The essence of refugee education is to help displaced young people to become autonomous, independent, able to fend for themselves, and to assist them in contributing to nation-building. Christian (2007:92) adds that it also assists the youth in equipping themselves to live as mature, creative and responsible members of a free society.

The first step in assisting refugee youths through non-formal education programmes is to screen all of them, in order to identify their socioeconomic learning needs. These young people's participatory rights are inalienable, yet in reality they face barriers to fully accessing their entitlements. Facilitating successful strategies to overcome these barriers requires information about the specific barriers they face (Shah 2007:52). In the light of this, the UNHCR in South Africa may join hands with government departments such as Home Affairs, Education and Labour, to screen and identify refugee youths with specific learning needs. As Amstrong (2007:79) states, the government must facilitate youth development by promoting an environment in which youth participation is harnessed and encouraged.

Having identified the youths, a working committee made up of representatives from relevant government departments, the UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) could be established to coordinate non-formal education and training activities. The committee should be given a clear mandate to equip refugee youths with specific skills and knowledge. The committee could seek funding from civil society, churches, government, the UNHCR, the UNDP, industries, banks, companies, local and international organisations as well as individuals willing to assist. Refugees who cannot read or write should be given literacy lessons in English, to enable them to acquire basic communication skills. Such literacy lessons could run side by side with practical skills courses of the participants' choice. Those who are able to read and write could start with practical courses straight away.

An intensive ten- to twelve-month non-formal practical training in basic accounting, entrepreneurship, building, plumbing, typing and computer skills, carpentry (woodwork, e.g. making and repairing tables and chairs), draughtsmanship or repairs (television, electrical appliances, radios, mobile phones, watches, shoes, leather bags, sewing and patching of clothes), painting, training in music, drama and staging of concerts could equip refugee youths with basic knowledge and skills for living. According to Keith Bell (2007:113), the precept of the non-formal programme is to equip young male and female refugees with tangible skills to earn a living. With discipline, encouragement and basic educational skills, they will be empowered to reach their potential and contribute to their communities. There is an acute shortage of personnel in trades like plumbing, carpentry, building, draughtsmanship and electrical works in the country. It is believed that once these youths are trained they can make up some of the shortfalls in the job market. Thus, non-formal education and training in such relevant skills may help refugee youths know their rights and responsibilities, reduce poverty and starvation, and above all help them participate in building the host country's economy.

Touching on minimum standards that could ensure quality education for refugee youths, Kirk and Cassity (2007:53) mention, among other things, three issues that are critical to the success of refugee youth education. These issues are applicable to the context of non-formal education for displaced youths in South Africa, and are briefly discussed below.

### ***Community participation***

The participation of local communities in refugee youths' education is crucial to the success of the non-formal programmes. To this end, the committee set up to oversee the project should involve community members in planning and implementation by eliciting their expertise and resources. Community participation highlights the fundamentals of good practice by engaging its members, utilising and promoting local resources, and grounding educational responses and analysis through initial assessment, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

### ***Access and learning environment***

Opportunities should be provided for refugee youths to learn new and relevant skills, so as to become economically independent. Access to learning also identifies possible intersectoral links which can enhance security, as well as the physical, cognitive and psychological wellbeing of the refugee youths in the country.

### ***Education policy and coordination***

This category focuses on the policy formulation, enactment, planning, implementation and coordination of education in emergency settings. Indeed, for a refugee education programme (formal or non-formal) to succeed it must be guided and coordinated by

relevant government policies, because hotchpotch programmes might be a waste of time and resources.

Identified refugee youths who are accomplished tradesmen and -women could be tested and hired to teach their fellow refugees. Christian (2007:92) affirms that in order to engage young people as a resource, some of the youths must be mentors and peer educators. The maxim of 'each one teach one' can be inspirational, less costly and very effective in emergency non-formal education and training programmes. Non-formal courses could be accommodated in designated technical or further education and training (FET) colleges throughout the country.

The committee charged with the responsibility of training refugee youths should register all those who acquire the needed competencies in specific non-formal practical courses. The committee should organise basic toolkits for all those who successfully complete the training, and should also negotiate with various municipalities to provide physical spaces in the various communities where those who might not find employment can engage in self-employment activities. This could prevent a situation where refugees ply their trade just anywhere, including on pavements, in parks, and so on. The activities of the trained refugee youths should be monitored and evaluated from time to time. This could guide stakeholders as to how the programme is assisting the youths, highlight its shortcomings and identify steps to be taken to improve future activities.

### **Conclusion**

This article has proposed a radical approach to the refugee situation in South Africa. It has argued that since the country is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Refugees and Displaced Persons, it is under international obligation to accommodate refugees. Like any other African country, South Africa has its own unique socioeconomic problems. However, if unskilled refugees are ignored they might be vulnerable to poverty and starvation, which could compound serious crime in the country. South Africa can turn the situation into an advantage by equipping refugee youths with the relevant skills which it is in dire need of, and in so doing empower refugees to participate in the country's development. Merely allowing refugee youths who are mostly physically strong to stay in the country, without any joint effort to engage them in relevant activities, may not be in the short- and long-term socioeconomic interest of South Africa: it may be a time bomb with potentially serious repercussions.

### **Note**

- 1 Prof Quan-Baffour is with the Department of Adult Education at the University of South Africa. He can be contacted by email at [quanbkp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:quanbkp@unisa.ac.za)



## References

- Amstrong, A. 2007. National youth councils. *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 5(1):79–90.
- Bell, K. 2007. Youth crime and violence. *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 5(1):109–124.
- Candappa, M. 2000. The right to education and an adequate standard of living: Refugee children in the UK. *International Journal of Children's Rights* 8(3):261–270.
- Christian, C. 2007. Youth work education and training: A strategic paper. *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 5(1):91–108.
- Feidel-Mertz, H. and A. Hammel. 2004. Integration and formation of identity: Exile schools in Great Britain. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 23(1):71–84.
- Kirk, J. and E. Cassity. 2007. Minimum standards for quality education for refugee youth. *Journal of Youth Studies Australia* 26(1):50–56.
- Mokwena, S. Putting youth engagement into practice: A toolkit for action. *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 5(1):26–51.
- Qingwen Xu. 2005. In the best interest of immigrant and refugee children: Deliberating on their unique circumstance. *Child Welfare League of America* 24:474–770.
- Shah, A. 2007. Governance, development and youth networks. *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 5(1):52–68.
- South Africa Broadcasting Corporation. 2009. News from the continent, SAFM, 2 May.