



Refugee Research Network

Research Snapshot

Congolese Refugee Young People in Uganda Rely on their own Capacities

What is this research about?

This research considers how Congolese young people who have fled to Uganda because of generalized insecurity in their home country make every day and long-term decisions towards survival and progress. In the context of armed conflict and migration, these young people protect themselves from oppression and make their way through daily life, either living in refugee camps or cities in the country of refuge. They often do so without relying on aid agencies. The researcher looked at various dimensions of decision-making by these young people including the choice to seek refuge in Uganda, where to go once in the country, and who to associate with to improve their life chances in the context of constrained choices.

The author uses four categories to describe ways that these young people – defined as those who have passed puberty and are not married – use their own capacities to try to change the situations they face. These categories, developed by Ruth Lister and adapted by Gerry Redmond, Nicola A. Jones and Andy Sumner, include:

1) Getting by: the small actions and decisions taken to cope with daily challenges;

What you need to know:

Many people see refugee young people only as vulnerable persons lacking their own capacities and in need of protection. In reality, refugee young people respond purposefully to violence and constraints that they face. Governments and humanitarian organizations can improve their protection responses to so-called forced migration by paying more attention to individuals' self-protection strategies.

2) Getting back at: rebellious behaviours developed in response to unjust circumstances;

3) Getting out: long-term strategic activities to transform the individual's circumstances; and,

4) Getting organized: the collective actions that the young people undertake with others to seek structural changes.

The researcher argues that policy-makers and politicians often do not understand self-survival strategies of young refugees and says that these people with power tend to view young refugees as vulnerable and without their own capacities.

What did the researcher do?

This research sought to understand the decisions and actions of young refugees as they migrate away from insecurity and protect themselves in refugee situations. The researcher has developed a definition of 'social age' that is complementary to chronological age and sought to capture the socially constructed meanings and roles associated with specific life course stages. Over 15 months, the researcher collected ethnographic data from young Congolese refugees in Uganda's Kyaka II refugee camp and in the capital city, Kampala. The author collected this data in several ways, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, writing exercises with refugee youth, and observation.

What did the researcher find?

The researcher found that young people in refugee situations actively make decisions with respect to their material, relational, and subjective well-being at both macro and micro levels. They make choices regarding domestic tasks and paid labour in order to address their needs at personal, family, and community levels. In this research, the researcher also describes the practical tactics that young people and their families use to protect themselves and to affect the decisions of people with power.

How can you use this research?

This research can be used as a model for understanding and describing the capacities of particular groups of refugees living in exile, especially young refugees who have sought refuge in a neighbouring country.

About the researcher

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Agency, refugee, Uganda, Kampala, Congolese, Kyaka II

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The Refugee Research Network (RRN) has been created to mobilize and sustain a Canadian and international network of researchers and research centres committed to the study of refugee and forced migration issues and to engaging policy makers and practitioners in finding solutions to the plight of refugees and displaced persons. This initiative has received funding from the Canadian SSHRC Knowledge Cluster program.