

Refugees pose unique headache for teachers

Challenge. The deputy refugee desk officer, Mr Pascal Ajusi, says teaching the young refugees in emergency situations is a challenge and, perhaps unsurprising, when aid agencies' prioritise areas that produce immediate and measurable results.

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ADJUMANI. Mr Richard Epeaju sits in his office at Mungula Primary School in Adjumani District, West Nile sub-region, consumed in thoughts. Among the school's pupils are 978 South Sudanese refugee children.

"They don't know how to sit in a classroom," said Mr Epeaju, highlighting one of several headaches teachers face handling the refugees.

"They don't know how to relate in the classroom freely with other students with different needs, let alone not knowing how to take in the content area and the skills you're passing unto to them."

The deputy refugee desk officer, Mr Pascal Ajusi, says teaching the young refugees in emergency situations is a challenge and, perhaps unsurprising, when aid agencies' prioritise areas that produce immediate and measurable results.

"The more people there are in



Studying. Refugees including children during a bible study session in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe District recently. Experts say teaching young refugees in emergency situations is a challenge. PHOTO BY VICTOR GRÖSSLING

need of help, the smaller the share of aid resources available for education and that is why education for refugees has become a struggle," said Mr Ajusi.

Education experts recommend that

children first become conversant in their mother tongues before using English if they are to understand thematic issues.

However, the situation at this refugee camp forces teachers to

teach in English, Kiswahili and Luo languages.

"It's very difficult to teach here. Many children don't understand English and the local languages in Uganda," Mr Epeaju said in an interview on August 29.

He added: "We need to develop materials for each of those languages spoken by refugees from South Sudan to enable them to understand well."

It is unclear who would take the responsibility for such translation. And neither is there consensus on which language would be the most suitable medium of instruction since the refugees come from diverse South Sudan communities.

According to Mr Epeaju, almost eight in every 10 of the upper primary pupils have dropped out.

"[If you] just look at enrollment, and not attendance, you'll only get part of the picture. Many of the children enrolled in upper classes of primary have dropped out because they don't see any future after P7," he said.

Statistics at Mungula Primary School indicate that by the end of last year, the school had 1,822 pupils from South Sudan, but that number had reduced by half to 978 by the end of last month.

"And as a result of staying in refugee camps, some South Sudan families go without food. They don't have money and most children, especially those staying with foster parents, decide to drop out to get married or to do business for survival," the school administrators note in a status update.

The deputy refugee desk officer Ajusi, who oversees Adjumani and Moyo districts, says: "Even with the influx of international donations, Uganda's school system does not yet have the resources to keep the refugee children beyond Primary Seven. Many of them who become of age either get married or go back to South Sudan. But there are

business." According to Ms Beatrice Okello, the senior programme officer, FAO -Uganda, it is unlikely that South Sudanese children will realise their right to an education unless government reviews its current approach and donors increase targeted funding.

"The high number of refugees children out of school is an immediate crisis because education is a fundamental right. Under international law, all children in Uganda, including South Sudanese refugees have a legal right to free primary and secondary education without discrimination," said Ms Okello.

That is true in theory. In practice, limited resources mean first communities and local governments are constrained to provide free education to all since they receive no funding for services based on census figures in which refugees were not captured.

Mr James Leku Piri, the chairman for Adjumani District, said the government has taken important steps to enroll South Sudan refugees in formal education but that the dropout rate is because they cannot afford paid-for secondary education and, as such, are demotivated to study hard.

"Our education system recognises that all children aged 3-18 have a right and are eligible to access education, irrespective of their status, but the refugee families often do not have the money to enroll their children beyond primary school," said Mr Piri.

State Disaster Preparedness minister Musa Eweru said the government and humanitarian agencies are "struggling to cope" with the influx of refugees, currently numbering more than one million. Majority are being hosted in West Nile.

"People have escaped absolute horror in South Sudan and what they are faced with when they get here is a further test of their resolve," minister Eweru said, adding: "As government and other aid agencies, we are doing our best to respond, but we simply cannot cover everyone's basic needs, including education."

KEY INFORMATION

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