

RURAL SETTLEMENTS FOR AFRICAN REFUGEES IN FIRST COUNTRIES OF ASYLUM: PROBLEMS OF INTEGRATION AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

BY VÉRONIQUE LASSAILLY-JACOB

INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifteen years, more than seventeen million people world wide have been forced out of their homelands. A significant number of these refugees originate in Africa. In spite of the uncertainty and the unreliability of African refugee statistics, in 1991 Africa was estimated to have approximately five million refugees¹. Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Malawi today support the largest concentration of the refugee population.

Most refugees flee across the nearest border and settle spontaneously among the local population, particularly when there is close cultural affinity. When war broke out in Eritrea, the Beni Amer refugees were welcomed by their brothers living on the Sudanese side. In this case, refugees self-settle in the border area with help from the local population. They are unregistered and unassisted by both host governments and the international community.

However, host governments worry about national security and depletion of their resources when the influx increases. They also worry about the enormous economic and social burden imposed by an uncontrollable mass influx of foreigners. They do not want to become hosts to self-settled refugees and prefer to directly control and supervise refugee flows into their territory and to channel them towards assigned areas. Most host countries have precarious national economies and limited resources to share with the newcomers. Host

populations are often as poor or even poorer than the refugees themselves².

In many cases, "reception" camps or "transit" camps are established near the border where the refugees are provided with emergency aid such as food, water, shelter, clothing, blankets and medical help. Camps are supposed to be temporary, otherwise the population develops a dependency syndrome on outside aid. However, in some cases, camps have tended to become permanent solutions i.e. the Sahrawi refugees have settled in camps in Algeria since 1975 and the Ogaden Somali and Galla have been accommodated in camps in Somalia since 1978.

Since the early 1960s, Africa has pioneered organized rural settlements as a "durable" solution to the problem of accommodating long-term refugees³. Refugees who are regrouped in camps located near the border, are moved to land settlement schemes inside the host countries. They are supposed to integrate locally and become self-sufficient through agriculture as soon as possible. This way of rehabilitating refugees was first started in the early 1960s by the UNHCR⁴ (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). The first rural settlement was Bibwe in the Kivu province of Zaïre, which opened in October 1961 for the tens of thousands of Rwandese Tutsi fleeing their country (Stein and Clark, 59).

This paper will first describe these organized settlements and their purpose. Their current situation will then

be analysed and discussed by examining the obstacles which have prevented them from becoming self-sufficient and locally integrated.

REFUGEE RURAL SETTLEMENTS' MAJOR OBJECTIVES

There are many reasons for implementing rural settlements for refugees in countries of first asylum. Firstly, until now most African refugees have been rural refugees who have settled in the country of first asylum⁵. Secondly, the host populations have had to share their scarce resources with a growing number of newcomers and cannot support any more long-term, unproductive people. Most Eritrean refugees have been living in Sudan for more than 20 years.

This means that the host countries have had to find long-term development-oriented strategies to support large, long-term refugee communities. But the burden of granting asylum is often too heavy for a single country which has to ask for international assistance. Land settlement schemes for refugees⁶ are implemented with the help of international aid. Almost all costs of rural settlements are met by the United Nations organizations, mainly the UNHCR and the World Food Program (WFP) in collaboration with international organizations such as Care International or the Red Cross or local non-governmental organizations (NGO). Host countries provide the agricultural land and the administrative services to run the settlements. During the last three decades, organized rural settlements have received considerable attention and funding because integrating refugees in host countries through agricultural self-sufficiency has been considered the best solution.

These schemes belong to the group of land settlement schemes conceived by governments in order to develop pioneer lands. Implementing an organized rural settlement involves several factors: identifying a suitable area according to soil and water supplies (drinking water, rainfall or irri-

gation water), investing in basic infrastructures such as access roads, site clearing and construction of buildings (including schools, dispensaries, community buildings and medical facilities). These development programs are supposed to benefit not only the refugees but, as much as possible, the local population too.

An organized rural settlement is either a small town or a number of "villages" surrounded by agricultural land. The Mozambiquan refugee settlement of Ukwimi in Zambia is made up of 64 villages. Upon arrival, each family head receives materials to build his or her house on an assigned plot. He or she also receives tools and seeds and a farmplot which has to be cleared. In Eastern Sudan, each refugee household is given a 5 to 10 "feddan" plot of rain-fed land (one feddan equals 0.4 ha). Food rations are supplied by the WFP for two years. Families are supposed to become self-sufficient through agriculture as soon as possible.

The UNHCR establishes three prerequisites for a settlement to be considered viable i.e. the necessary basic facilities must be operational, the new settlers must be able to feed themselves and the new community should be locally integrated. A rural settlement is deemed to be viable within four years. Then, the settlement is handed over to the host government which has to integrate it into the local administrative structure. The international donor community is then relieved of its financial and managerial burden. However, the reality of self-sufficiency and local integration does not always live up to the expectations established by the UNHCR.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND LOCAL INTEGRATION

At issue is how to define self-sufficiency and local integration. At what level of subsistence do we speak of self-sufficiency? What are the criteria that indicate a settlement is locally integrated? According to the UNHCR local integration is "The process by which the refugee is assimilated into the social and economic life

of a new national community." T. Kuhlman argues that the concepts of integration and assimilation are different and finds this definition unsatisfactory (Kuhlman, 1-20). G. Kibreab has a more realistic view of local integration and sees it as "an economic, social and cultural process by which refugees become members of the host society on a permanent basis" (Kibreab, 1989, 469).

Self-sufficiency is a concept which is very difficult to measure or evaluate. For most aid agencies, refugees' self-sufficiency means achieving at least the same standard of living as that of the local residents. But can we speak of self-sufficiency when the standard of living is *below* subsistence level, as is often the case? "Throughout Africa, the dilemma exists of establishing acceptable and sustainable living standards for refugees settled where the living standards of the resident rural population are themselves often unacceptably low" (Armstrong, 1988, 70).

ORGANIZED RURAL SETTLEMENTS

It is worth noting that only a minority of refugees are actually living in organized rural settlements. All refugees could not possibly be accommodated in organized settlements because of insufficient funds and staff. Indeed most refugees are reluctant to be settled within these schemes and prefer to remain self-settled. Angolan refugees in Zambia resisted attempts made by the government to place them in organized settlements despite the economic hardships faced in spontaneous resettling and despite the high levels of welfare given to refugees in settlements (Hansen, 375-80).

Two main factors explain why refugees are reluctant to move into organized settlements. They do not want to be controlled and they perceive these to be permanent settlements. Most refugees feel they live in temporary exile. They fully intend to repatriate as soon as possible. Therefore, they do not want to put down roots in the host country. The other factor is the

way of life imposed on them. A. Hansen who conducted interviews among self-settled Angolan refugees in Zambia, found that "their long-term goal was to re-establish their normal existence. Normal existence meant living in a village or town, not in a camp under government supervision." (Hansen, 378).

From 1961 to 1987, one hundred and thirty-two refugee settlements have been set up in Africa. They have assisted some one million refugees. This figure is about one fifth of the total refugee population and does not include internally displaced persons. Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaïre, Botswana, Burundi and Mozambique are the main countries of asylum where these settlements have been established.

Out of the one hundred and six refugee settlements set up between 1962 and 1982, only eighty-four are operating. Eleven were abandoned and twenty-one were closed due to voluntary repatriation. Of these eighty-four settlements, thirty were declared self-sufficient by the UNHCR between 1966 and 1982. It should be mentioned that fifty-four settlements had not attained self-reliance by 1982. Furthermore, most of the thirty settlements took longer than four years to attain self-sufficiency and twenty-one of them have needed substantial post hand-over aid in order to re-attain economic viability (Stein and Clark, 59).

Why do the majority of refugee rural settlements present such disappointing results despite the huge amount of money spent to make them viable?

OBSTACLES TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY?

Unsuitable Locations

The first and main obstacle is an unsuitable location; frequently inadequate in terms of geographical situation, soil, water supply and natural resources available to the number of settlers.

Many settlements are located in marginal and isolated areas where

accessibility is a major problem. Some twenty thousand Rwandese refugees have been settled in an underpopulated and underdeveloped area of northeastern Burundi. Most refugee settlements in Eastern Sudan are located in remote areas. Geographic isolation from main urban centres and transportation networks hinders marketing and trade.

Refugee sites are often unsuitable in terms of soil, rainfall and water resources. In Eastern Sudan, several settlement sites were chosen by the government in spite of warnings made by international survey missions (Stein and Clark, 59). As a result, the Quala En Nahal refugee settlement, which regroups farmers dependent on rain-fed agriculture, is located in an area where rainfall is erratic and crop failure is high.

Some settlements were closed due to viability or security problems. Koboko, set up in 1962 for twelve thousand Sudanese in Uganda, was abandoned in 1966-67 because it was too close to the border and too much involved in violence (Stein and Clark, 59).

Inadequate farm sizes are another obstacle in achieving self-reliance for these agricultural settlements. Allocated plots are often too small to allow food self-sufficiency. Hence yields decline and erosion spreads because of continuous cultivation without fallowing. "The land resource in the old settlement of Qala en Nahal, when looked at in the light of the present population needs, is inadequate to enable all the families to receive the ten feddans of cultivable land which were considered as sufficient to enable a family of average size to become self-reliant" (Kibreab, 1987b, 65). Furthermore, no allowance is usually made for future land demands which will arise from the natural population growth. "In the old local settlements in Eastern Sudan, land fragmentation is one of the problems facing the old settlers. Parents are now sharing their holdings with their married male children because their future need was not taken into account when the settlements were planned" (Kibreab, 1989, 486).

An even more serious problem is lack of adequate water supplies. In the refugee settlement of Mishamo in Tanzania, A. Armstrong reports that in southern villages women have to walk distances of three to five kilometers to fetch water which was intended to be available within five hundred meters (Armstrong, 1986, 30-52). The inadequate water supply threatened the viability of Ulyankulu in Tanzania and required that more than half of its fifty thousand population be relocated (Armstrong, 1988, 57-73). In Somalia, four of the five areas which contain thirty-one refugee camps have critical water shortages (Rogge, 1981, 195-212).

Another obstacle to achieving self-sufficiency is linked to overpopulation. Large numbers of refugees contribute to the deforestation of wide areas surrounding the sites in their search for firewood and building materials. The refugee settlement of Katumba in Tanzania, which has now grown to over one hundred thousand inhabitants, faces major environmental problems (Armstrong, 1988, 57-73). H. Christensen mentions camp areas in Somalia which are slowly being transformed into stony, arid desert (Christensen, 48).

According to G. Kibreab, the main reason why these unsuitable sites are chosen for refugee settlements is linked to host government policies (Kibreab, 1989, 468-490). Firstly, governments tend to use refugee settlements as a means of colonizing and developing the country's underdeveloped and marginal areas. Implementing refugee settlements in remote areas is an opportunity to create an infrastructure with the help of international assistance which otherwise would have been unavailable without the refugees. This has been especially true for the settlements of Meheba in Zambia and of Ulyankulu, Katumba, Mishamo and Mwezi in Tanzania. Secondly, by putting refugees in isolated and thinly populated areas, host governments try to avoid problems of land disputes and local hostility which frequently arise when new schemes are set up in occupied areas. Thirdly, refugees settled in

remote areas cannot compete with nationals for scarce resources and employment opportunities.

Governments do not pay much attention to the environment and potential resources of the sites because they perceive these sites to be temporary solutions for temporary settlers who are expected to repatriate as soon as possible. Even when there is no emergency situation involved in the planning, there are few (if any) feasibility studies and base-line surveys conducted to determine the suitability of the sites.

Some settlements such as Mishamo in Tanzania, Ukwimi in Zambia or Etsha in Botswana have been successful because advance planning and site preparation were undertaken before settlers arrived. Ukwimi was located in a reserve.

Inadequate Assistance Programs

Another major obstacle to achieving self-sufficiency is related to inadequate assistance programs, mainly agricultural programs.

As is often the case, refugees are not allowed to use their traditional farming methods to farm their allocated plot. Refugee settlements are seen by planners as an opportunity to introduce modern farming techniques such as tractors, fertilizers, insecticides, etc. Mechanization and block farming are frequently used. Refugees are considered risk-taking settlers who are ready to abandon their traditional farming practices, the way voluntary, highly motivated settlers do. Planners do not take into consideration the fact that they deal with uprooted and traumatized people who are distraught at having left their homeland and who attempt to cling to their traditional way of life as a way of coping. Even in Etsha, Botswana, which is considered a successful refugee settlement, the agricultural program was a failure as noted by D. Potten:

Destumping was emphasized, although it led to wind erosion and was unnecessary as the Hambukushu cultivated mainly with the hoe. The kinds of seeds purchased for the farmers were not geared to

their preferences. More than 600 donkeys were brought to the settlers, although they were not accustomed to ploughing with donkeys...Several hundred ploughs were purchased but not more than 30% were ever used. (Potten, 116)

This is an example of wasteful assistance. There should be a distinction between development approaches needed under "normal circumstances" for voluntary settlers and those needed in a crisis situation as is the case for refugee settlers.

In these organized settlements, farmland is considered the main source of income and employment and planners focus on farm activities. However, rain-fed agriculture is seasonal and refugees are under-employed. In addition, the settlements often regroup a heterogeneous community consisting of people from both rural and urban backgrounds. Refugee settlers may be educated, as is the case of some Ugandans settled at Kigwa. Others may be pastoralists, as were the Rwandese refugees at Mwesi in Tanzania and many Eritrean refugees in rural settlements in Sudan. Urban, educated refugees are expected to support themselves as settled farmers with all the new skills and mental attitudes that this entails. Speaking of the settlement of Dukwe in Botswana, J. Zetterqvist mentions that the traditional Botswana communities base their economy on cattle with crops as a complement (Zetterqvist, 1990). As refugees are not allowed to own cattle their economy is heavily dependent on the production of crops.

Furthermore, refugees are not involved enough in the setting up of the settlements. Settlement commanders who handle settlement affairs have often left little room for refugee participation and have developed antagonistic relations with the refugees. For example, A. Armstrong points out the very limited representation of Burundis in the Mishamo settlement's secretariat which is dominated by Tanzanian staff (Armstrong, 1986, 30-52).

Aid agencies mostly address the men as far as development assistance

is concerned. However, female-headed households are numerous in refugee settlements and most of the assistance provided for them is relief assistance. As a result, refugee women, who constitute sometimes the majority of the refugee population, are often marginalized.

Finally, the high level of infrastructure and services provided in organized settlements suffer from problems of maintenance and long-term upkeep costs. Many programs built in too much external dependence, such as regular importation of fuel and spare parts. These advantages are often short-lived. After being handed over, many (if not most) of the settlements experienced difficulties maintaining their infrastructure and services because local funding was inadequate or non-existent. It involved major adjustment problems.

The Qala en Nahal scheme in Eastern Sudan was totally dependent upon the construction of an elaborate pump and storage system which absorbed the greater part of the scheme's funding. Moreover, when poor maintenance caused pumps to break down, the scheme was threatened with abandonment (Rogge, 1981, 203).

OBSTACLES TO LOCAL INTEGRATION?

Of the twenty-one organized settlements that were closed due to repatriation between 1962 and 1982, seven were already considered self-sufficient (Kibreab, 1989, 468-490). This suggests that achieving self-sufficiency is not enough to retain refugees in a host country. Economic integration should be accompanied by social, cultural and legal integration. But several obstacles make the achievement of local integration an impossible target under the present system.

Social and Cultural Integration

The location of refugee settlements in the host country can be seen as an obstacle to social and cultural integration. When refugees are kept in isolated or thinly populated areas,

they are prevented from establishing relations with their hosts and becoming members of the host society.

The settlement patterns themselves can be perceived as an obstacle to local integration. According to G. Kibreab, by keeping refugees together in spatially segregated sites, host governments want them to maintain their cultural identity in order to facilitate their repatriation (Kibreab, 1989, 468-490). For example, in the refugee situation in Eastern Sudan, "Organized settlements are relatively isolated pockets of refugee communities, with very limited social contacts with the hosts" (Bulcha, 84).

Refugees accommodated in organized settlements are often reluctant to become integrated — they express great nostalgia for their homeland and previous way of life. They suffer from a breakdown of the family structure and dislocation of the traditional community based on kinship. In addition they suffer a loss of cultural identity and from not belonging to a form of social organization any more. Refugee rural settlements often regroup nuclear families or isolated individuals from different villages or even ethnic groups. In many cases, local integration seems to be better achieved among spontaneously settled refugees. During his interviews with refugees in Eastern Sudan, M. Bulcha found that eighty-two percent of self-settling refugees spoke Arabic as compared with forty-eight percent among those in the organized settlements (Bulcha, 73-90).

Another obstacle preventing local integration is linked to the status of the refugees in the settlement areas. They are by law prohibited to leave the settlements without authorization and work outside the settlement. Their movements require official permits. In other words, they are expected to behave like settlers without the rights of citizens.

Legal Integration

Local integration is impossible without legal integration. If long-term refugees cannot acquire the citizenship of a host country, they will never

become members of the country. Some governments such as Tanzania, Botswana and Burundi decided to grant citizenship to refugees settled in the oldest settlements. As noted by J. Rogge:

Botswana was the first to recognize that full self-sufficiency also implies the creation among refugees of a feeling of national responsibilities and that this was best achieved by giving refugees the option of becoming citizens of their adopted state. (Rogge, 1985, 73)

Tanzania granted naturalization to thirty-six thousand of the Rwandese refugees in 1980. Two thousand five hundred Angolan refugees in Botswana and a limited number of Tutsi refugees in Burundi were granted citizenship. However, we notice considerable unwillingness on the part of refugees to become naturalized citizens of the host states. For example, in the former Mozambiquan settlement of Mputa, which was handed over to local administration over ten years ago, only ten families out of an approximate one thousand one hundred have chosen to acquire citizenship. Mishamo's refugees were found to be the least integrated with eighty-nine percent unwilling to be naturalized.

CONCLUSION

There is a contradictory perception held about these local settlements which threatens their viability. Refugee land settlements in Africa are perceived by international donors to be a durable solution, a means to enable refugees to attain self-reliance and to integrate locally. For this reason, they build costly infrastructures and services and carry out costly development programs. But most host governments perceive these settlements to be a means of colonizing and developing new lands. They do not pay much attention to these settlements because they consider refugees as temporary settlers in their country. And refugees see themselves as temporary settlers unless citizenship of the host country is granted. Unwillingness on the

part of hosts is probably the major obstacle facing integration of these settlements.

What about the future? The obstacles preventing refugee settlements from achieving integration and self-sufficiency are likely to increase, not diminish, because of the continuing decline of host country economies and lower funding from the international community. In spite of all these obstacles, organized rural settlements will still provide one solution to the problem of accommodating long-term rural refugees who have constituted the largest group of refugees so far, though as J. Rogge noted:

no similar set of solutions has yet been evolved to enable host countries to deal with the ever rising tide of urban refugees. This issue is now one of the major challenges confronting the continent's asylum states, as well as the international community in general. (Ibid., 82)

Notes

¹ The actual number of African refugees is far greater. Part of them have found refuge in their own country and are considered internally displaced people. By late 1990, there were a minimum of four hundred thousand internally displaced Somalis. They live in refugee-like conditions but are not considered refugees according to the criteria established by the Organization of African Unity Convention of 1969 and therefore don't receive any assistance. Some of them spontaneously resettle in urban or rural areas and are not registered. "It is part of the tragedy of being a refugee that he or she can't be helped as a refugee unless he or she is included in a statistic" (Neldner, 395)

² Despite precarious national economies the Eastern, Central and Southern African nations, for whom the refugee burden is most heavy, have never closed their borders to potential refugees nor have the so-called refugees ever been forcibly turned back.

³ While in the past, political conflicts were resolved within years, nowadays turmoils face a much longer time to be settled. Most refugees fleeing anti-colonial wars were repatriated once guerrilla warfare ended. Nowadays many refugees remain long-term refugees.

⁴ The first UNHCR involvement in Africa occurred in 1957 when about two million refugees from Algeria fled to Tunisia and Morocco. Camps were established for these refugees who received emergency assistance under UNHCR supervision.

⁵ Today, a growing number of refugees come from an urban background. Only the few who are better educated find permanent asylum in a second country of asylum. On the one hand, most African refugees, particularly those from rural areas, are unwilling to move far from their homeland, expecting to repatriate as soon as possible. On the other hand, the industrialized countries are unwilling to receive these people with a rural background.

⁶ One country, Sudan, created two other forms of refugee settlements — the wage-earning settlements where the refugees are supposed to become self-supporting through wages earned in the agricultural irrigated schemes and the semi-urban settlements which aimed at relocating spontaneously settled urban refugees to specific settlements located peripherally to cities.

Note

* Véronique Lassailly-Jacob is a Geographer at the Centre for African Studies, C.N.R.S., France and is presently a visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Canada.