

**PRESENTATION FROM THE COORDINATING BODY OF REFUGEE COMMUNITIES
(YOUTH COMMITTEE) @ GAUTENG YOUTH AFRICA COLLOQUIUM**

“DEEPENING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DIALOGUE”

Programme Director,
Your Excellence Deputy Minister of the Department of Home Affairs, Malusi Gigada
Soweto Councillor, Nthabiseng Mpoi
Distinguished Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Young people,

Dumelang, Tobela, Bonjour, Jambo.
Greetings from The Coordinating Body for Refugee Communities-

CBRC- is a community organising and mobilising, lobby and advocacy -based organization formed by refugees for refugees. With the following main objectives:

- organise country-communities/membership,
- promote intercommunity relationship and solidarity
- create awareness around basic rights and obligations of refugees in the host country
- encourage individual members to be self reliant (develop own honest means of survival)
- enhance civic education in the refugee communities
- relaying concerns of host community to refugees and vice versa
- exposing each refugee community values and cultures in South Africa,
- encouraging integration

As a NGO we are involved in the noble task to ensure the local integration of refugees, men, women and children, help them with their many challenges they face daily and also offering them hope.

Dear friends, in homes where parents give floor to their children to speak, they create and initiate dialogue and sometimes parents learn from these children.

Youth throughout Africa has been and remain involved into significant struggles, whether of liberation, independence or survival for themselves, paying a heavy price for results. We applaud the courage and endurance of these young men and women, children who remain committed to challenges for the betterment of our societies.

At the start of 2007, 9.9 million people were classified as refugees by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Refugees are people who flee from their countries of origin to seek asylum/protection in a host country. Reasons for fleeing their countries range from fear of persecution to fear of being killed due to one's political activism, race, religion, culture, freedom of expression etc.... When such they flee, they are likely to be followed by their immediate dependants mainly wives and children. But several cases of unaccompanied, orphan or abandoned minors exist, travelling alone across several countries to escape the turmoil but also facing terrifying situations on their way. The DHA would know that between July 2006 and August

2007 has registered 497 child-asylum seeking; the numbers are increasing according to our partners working with them through shelters.

The advent of democracy in Africa in 1990's has left countries war torn and millions of displaced populations. South Africa as a signatory to the international legal instruments both the 1951 UN Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention on refugees issues, has also shown solidarity in hosting refugees, as was the cases for other African countries during struggle for its liberation. Great icons of this country were few years ago called refugees in other African countries and some where young when they left this country. Our former president Nelson Mandela was a refugee, Jacob zuma the ANC Deputy President was a refugee, The Minister of Health, was also a refugee.

The plight of refugees in South Africa especially, of our young people should draw our attention, when one considers the importance of their implication in the development process. No youth, no future for any country.

Today, refugee communities including youth acknowledge the efforts deployed by the South African Government and non government institutions as well as the civil society in welcoming several hundreds of us as fellow humans and offering us a temporary home.

Youth throughout the world, Millions are still experiencing horrors amongst them. Many of these children grow up in refugee camps and others remain without country. These children are far from enjoying their childhood, especially those unaccompanied.

The truth of the matter is, youth without a place called "home" is simply denied the right to contribute to the development of any community, any nation or any continent, as they cannot build their own life, consequently they possess no hope for the future.

We believe that awareness should be created around the positive impacts being made by refugees in the country. We may note the economic & cultural role played in terms of **skills, expertise, experiences, ethnic & racial diversity**.

This is one of the most important but ignored tool to roll back xenophobia.

Although refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa have some reasonable amount of legal rights, accessing such rights are far from guaranteed, in other words there is a considerable gap between the legal rights and actual life experiences of refugees and asylum seekers.

Due to lack of social assistance in general, refugees have developed survival mechanisms, mostly in informal business sector.

Most unfortunates, the refugee documents are not recognised by most service providers in the country, due to

- Lack of awareness around refugee permit in public and private institutions such as health care, education, housing, employment, finance, traffic department, makes it difficult for holders of these documents to access services.

Besides the above mentioned difficulties encountered by parents, their young people are also faced with the several challenges. For example:

- Birth Certificates of our new born babies are labelled “aliens”. As sense of belonging to society or perhaps a place where children or young people may call home does not exist because of this practice. Therefore their integration is also limited in reality.
- Access to education (document & grants/bursary)

“Some refugee scholars claim that their educational standards are being deliberately downgraded by the HSRC and that they are thereby denied access to educational institutions and to the job market”.

- HIV/AIDS: lack of awareness towards the refugee youth because of the language barrier.

Despite South Africa’s positive commitments in promoting a just society for all, **“refugees and asylum seekers face significant obstacles to protection in South Africa”** (NCRA, 2006: 3). Besides, the initial difficult access and lengthy asylum procedure, reality on the ground amongst our communities, shows it exists inadequate programs for assisting unaccompanied children, difficulties accessing government-funded social services and in many cases of arrest, detention and deportation of young lives.

The laid down principles in the South African constitution stipulating the impartial, fairly, equitable and unbiased provision of services to all appears to exclude refugees even though they form a subset of ‘*all who live in it*’. The ‘Batho Pele’ document stipulating the practical implementation strategy of service delivery in the country undermines the geographical and linguistic background of refugees in the country. On the contrary it has become a privileged document and not a legitimate expectation to refugees.

Publishing the ‘Batho Pele’ policy document in only five official national languages prevents refugees from other language-parts of Africa the right to information.

Accessing services in a country with five languages, most of which cannot be spoken or understood by refugees can be a difficult task.

According to a young refugee: ***“In my own view I think refugees tend to be treated like the last grade of people in the country”.***

But, The majority of Refugee Young people hosted by South Africa are of the opinion that: Access to services can be improved,

Only a small percentage (12.8%) feels that access to services for refugees cannot be improved. Refugees who fall in this category, claims that the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in the country falls far beyond human dignity and seems nobody is taking note of that fact. They defend themselves in saying: ***“Go to Home Affairs for refugees and see how they are poorly treated”.*** ***“In South Africa, refugees are given a three months permit which when looking for employment the employers always reject your application”.***

Another young refugee summed up the implications of having difficulties in accessing services: ***“If you have no access to services, you end up being poor, no money to survive with, no education, no work and no protection of your life”.***

It makes life a bit tough and discouraging from getting involved or from investing in any project. Sometimes you feel that you are useless, while you know that you have skills to contribute to the development of your host. The main problem is that with time, if there is no improvement, one can lose his skills.

He continues in saying: ***“It makes one feel uncomfortable and gives you the feeling that you are not wanted in the society”.***

While refugees might develop a sense of rejection and marginalization, it might simultaneously influence their manners and directions of operation in the country. One young refugee notes: ***“Since basic rights are not guaranteed, life is difficult, and pressure is mounting on me especially from my parents who used to rely on me when I was home”.***

Difficulties in accessing services in the country renders youth refugees or not vulnerable to thieves, health hazards and/or death, and expose them to all the imaginable problems. One said:

If I can't go to hospital it means when I fall sick I am dead, if I can't go to school it means I can't help my family, if I don't have employment it means my family and I are dead, if I can't have proper papers it means when I go out I will be arrested, if I don't have accommodation it means I am a street kid.

Yes, of course life for young refugees can be better if one has to consider the practicalities of the well transcribed legal documents and laws concerning young refugees and people living in the country.

One young refugee suggested as follows: ***“If we have people who reach directly to the refugees, so that they know the problem facing them, it might improve the situation, dialogue will be initiated and development goals achieved.”***

Other suggestions include equal treatment for both South Africans and non-South Africans reduced discrimination in the administration of drugs especially to African migrants,

providing basic services to refugees in the country, and promptly providing proper permits and documentation that do not expire too frequently, provision of housing, opening up banking and financial opportunities and employability can be achieved if South Africa wants refugees and asylum seekers to contribute to the country's nation building.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the difficulties faced by our youth in getting integrated in the country, South Africa, as an adopted land of survival should create mechanism to help enhance the socio-economic situation.

Perhaps South Africa should draw elements of comparison from other African countries hosting more refugees with more modest economic development than he has.

We are calling upon this forum to consider the urgency of the youth refugees plight and convey the message to all role players in this society.

There is an urgent need to encourage, and formulate less restrictive but more progressive policy framework and programmes, specially design for the Youth as follow:

Access to services: This need improvement, irrespective of which service. Amongst others, the services highlighted are,

- Formulating policies that will allow the employment and assimilation of young refugees and asylum seekers.
- Providing housing and accommodation support to refugees and asylum seekers.
- Providing free drugs to young refugees in the country.
- Educating the police and other law enforcement authority to respect young refugees and their documentation.
- Fight discrimination and xenophobia in the country.
- Establish and develop a culture of cooperation with African migrants in the country.
- Provide free education for all refugee children
- Young Refugees and asylum seekers should be inclusive in the South African educational budgets
- Understand and practice the dictum that "Equality is equity".
- Stop the extortion and exploitation of youth especially those involved in human trafficking as well as Home Affairs officials, police and traffic cops.

- Create opportunities for young refugees to freely express themselves and their problems
- Support them to develop their emotional, social, economic and educational abilities
- Open up forums to express themselves, and be able to present their problems for all to hear and see.
- Help young refugees to develop their skills and talents acquired from their home countries for the benefit of all South Africans.
- Raise awareness on refugee issues among youth by providing educational communities with information, training and resources
- Build bridges between youth refugee and in schools through cultural exchange programmes, celebration and beyond
- Take actions in helping refugees by organizing awareness-raising events to educate others on refugee issues and to raise funds for partner refugee schools

In sum, a development of a culture of inclusion and participation of all in South Africa is crucial for South Africa to be able to develop a common nation's consciousness that would ensure that South Africa is united in direction and diverse in contribution. This it self would not only benefit refugees in the country but the country as a whole. A paradigmatic shift where refugees are seen as an opportunity rather than a problem, and advisory bodies that work with service delivery organizations in the country are urgently needed to ensure the proper, urgent and easy access to services delivery to refugees in South Africa.

We believe in African youth for their tenacity, their ability to take charge and through dialogue they are capable to achieve developmental goals. Their participation goes deeper, their involvement get stronger as they feel belonging to the same family, because ***"Umntu, Ngumuntu, Ngabantu!"***.

Syabonga.
