Host-Refugee Relations in Ogun State, Nigeria

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Introduction
It is generally believed that the influx of refugees into communities is a burden either on the individuals or the community as a whole. In some circumstances, refugees get into the communities accompanied economic activities that lead to growth or development initiated by international agencies because of the presence of these refugees. In some other circumstances however, the influx of refugees is often accompanied by problems. It therefore suffices to say that refugees in host communities have their advantages as well as disadvantages, emphasising that not all individuals will benefit or suffer equally (Whitaker, 2002; Landau, 2003; Felleson, 2003; Chambers, 1986). In determining the impact of refugee settlement on host communities, a number of variables will have to be examined. These include the size and type of refugee settlement; international aid and support to host communities; the history of interaction between the two groups; the economic state of affairs of refugees entering the community and above all cultural similarities and differences among the different communities (Felleson 2003; Veney 2007; Whitaker 2003; Landau 2003; Chambers 1986; Black 1998; Schmidt 2000). There are difficulties in using these variables to assess impact on host communities. However, these variables can be used by government and agencies to assess where to locate refugee camps and the type of projects and financial resources to be directed to such communities in the interest of refugees. Apart from Bakar, studies have proved that Host-Refugee relations bring lots of benefits and costs to both the refugees and the host community. This is reinforced by Bakar (1995) who recognises that refugee migrations bring both benefits and cost to host countries.

Although Refugees enter communities with virtually nothing in terms of cash and assets, they have the willpower to survive and are prepared to put their energies into productive activities that could also benefit the hosts (Mehta & Gupte, 2003:18). Their plights do not render them incapable, because the refugee population often comprises skilled and unskilled labour, and entrepreneur knowledge. These various abilities can be deployed into productive activities that can bring about increased productivity. In Tanzania for example, a Congolese camp boasted “48 restaurants, 32 bars, 95 shops and 116 market stalls” (Turam, 2001). Similarly, Harrell-Bond (1986) observed that Ugandan refugees through their capital projects were able to contribute positively to the local economy of Sudan. This eventually saw an expansion in markets through increase in local goods and at the same time creates job opportunities that bring benefits for both host communities and the refugees.

The presence of refugees in camps would always urge humanitarian agencies to provide some basic services in the camps. This attracts the best local staffs that are often placed on higher salaries and inject more money not only into the pockets of those employed but also into the economy. Local institutions end up losing staff to NGOs while empowering local staff financially. Where the employed with improved wages gets financial strength especially by abandoning previous jobs, this may generate hostility from the local community (Harrell-Bond 1986). The refugees are left with no option but to readjust and fit into such an unfriendly environment. The consequences of such hostilities are that besides physical attacks on the refugees, livelihood opportunities as a key factor for refugee survival is jeopardized hence increasing insecurity in the refugee camps.

In communities where cultural and traditional backgrounds are similar, with a common language, refugees and host communities can easily socialise and establish friendships. This was seen in refugee camps within the Mano - River Union countries in West Africa as well as in Kenya. In the early years of refugee presence, Kaiser (2000) noted that “relations between (Sierra Leone) refugee communities and the (Guinean) local population were said to be good”. Kenya refugees were also seen frequenting
Somalia refugee camps to discuss political events in restaurants, teashops and stores (Veney, 2007). But where the community is isolated or located away from major urban centres, social dynamics can easily alter after the initial solidarity in welcoming the refugees into the host community. With time, the locals can easily reject the refugees especially when available resources in the community are limited in supply in the face of increased refugee population. Similarly, humanitarian aid to refugees might attract local communities who many a time would want to make profit out of their misfortune. The seemingly new host-refugee relations sometimes turned out to be short lived and refugees might end up accusing the local populace as exploiters and restrict them from entering their camp. This might result into conflict, forcing the community people to also disallow the refugees entering their communities and refugees end up being confined to camp. Social relations are interrupted and cordial relations that once exist turned sour. "From a long-term perspective, re-prioritising social relations and cultural exchange between refugees and host communities can actually encourage competition and conflict that leads to isolation and segregation" (Felleson, 2003).

Refugee camps some times are located in areas already degraded and at the same time experiencing desertification. Refugees as well as hosts are in need of fuel for cooking and some other activities. In Africa particularly, the absence of fuel suggests the use of trees, which results in deforestation of the environment for both refugees and host. Refugees from Sierra Leone who were in Guinea saw a turn of events as the local population grew less welcoming towards refugees about the effects refugee farming activities had on their land (Kaiser, 2001). Similar experiences could be cited in war torn Sierra Leone. Between Tiama and Bo in Southern Sierra Leone, the Refugee Camp that was established for Liberian refugees in the 90s has been transformed into a permanent settlement for refugees who decided not to return to Liberia. Farm lands have been over used not only for farming but for commercial charcoal burning.

Also evidence has shown that refugees are predisposed to become resource degraders as they end up using unsustainable resource use practices (Whitaker 1999). In Eastern Chad, the presence of refugees has affected development and infrastructure. Health facilities which used to serve the community were seen to be no longer adequate and in some instances forced to close down. This is presumed to be as a result of an increase in human population with the possibility of risk of epidemic.

Relationship between hosts and refugees is therefore seen by many as a cycle of exploitation for which both parties cast suspicion on one another, which exacerbate tensions in the community. This study therefore examines the relationship between refugees and the host community in the Ogun State, Nigeria and to ascertain whether Host-Refugee relations could be characterize as peaceful or not.

Methodology:

The study focuses on Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees at the Oru Camp, Ogun State in Nigeria. In examining the relationship between refugees and host communities, the study made use of a combination of data collection methodologies. These include the use of desk research to enrich knowledge base in relation to the interaction that exists between refugees and the host community. This was supported through extensive observations in order to determine the mode of life of refugees and other community members and identify differences that do exist in their way of life. A structured questionnaire was administered targeting 125 refugees a sample from an estimated refugee population of 450 in Oru Camp. Three focus group discussions were conducted in the community in order to verify information provided by the refugees and at the same time sound the opinions of key informants in the community with regards relationship between refugees and the host community. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics to give meaning to the research findings.

Results and Discussions

Host-Refugee Relations

Community relations with refugees are important for peace and security among the people in the community. This has benefits for both refugees and hosts in terms of employment and service. Social relations according to research findings revealed that refugees’ participation in community
functions was on a low side. This was confirmed by respondents (73.6%) who claimed that they have never been invited to participate in community social functions. The absence of such participation could warrant refugees to constantly remind themselves of their refugee status and see no reason in promoting peace and stability and development of the community. Host Community believes that refugee status ends when once there is an end to hostilities and refugees will be repatriated to their country of origin. The host community is of the opinion that the participation of refugees in community social functions is limited as a result of differences in cultural and traditional backgrounds in some specific practices. The clash of such cultural differences may strain relationship between refugees and host community as claimed by the community.

Access to community facilities by the refugees is limited by financial constraints on the part of the refugees. Pupils and students though few have access to schools and colleges (26.4%) either within the community or far away from the refugee camp. Income levels of refugees, compared to community members, are low and 23.2% of the refugee population could afford the cost of public transportation whenever there is a need to travel to the urban centers for some other economic activities. Discrimination in the use of public facilities is almost not in existence since cost of services depends on the demand for such services. It suffices to say that neither refugees nor Nigerian citizens are favoured by prices for goods and services in the market.

Economic activities, including access to employment opportunities, are not restricted to citizens in the Ogun state. This simply means that refugees have the right to apply for the limited jobs provided they have the requisite qualification(s). Public sector and private sector jobs in the community are limited and it is assumed that where vacancies are available, recruitments will favour the host community. Unfortunately, 65% of host community are without public or established private sector jobs and rely on basic petty trading for their survival. Okada riding, a new enterprise, is common among youths, of which many are school dropouts. This situation revealed that refugees at Oru Camp have very little prospect of being employed in the face of the stiff competition posed with the host community.

Health and market facilities are made available to the refugees though again constrained by their income levels. Curable diseases could not be prevented in the refugee camp and the closure of the health centre in the camp worsened the health situation in the camp. From observation, available health centres in the host community have pressure with essential drugs short in supply and could not meet the demands of both refugees and host community.

Buying and selling of goods and services are common among host community members. In some instances refugees through backyard gardening, supply the market with vegetables. Income received from sale could hardly take care of the day’s expenditure. Access to trade facilities by refugees therefore is not restricted and this forms part of the basic rights of refugees in host countries as enshrined in the refugee convention of 1951.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Security threats</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robbery only</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape only</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud only</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution only</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery and Rape</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidation and harassment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery, Fraud and Prostitution(combined)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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Security threats from the community according to refugees include Robbery, Fraud, Rape Prostitution, Intimidation and Harassments. 44% of the population has experienced both night and day robbery.

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from members of host community. Robbery itself is not new in the Nigerian society (Joy Olekanma, 2011) especially when there are increased numbers of unemployed youths, some with basic education and skills. The absence of jobs and other livelihood opportunities could generally lead the young population into criminal activities. It is therefore not a surprise that the refugee community may also be a target of robbery by criminals in the host community. The Focus Group Discussions held with the community revealed that the activities of these criminal gangs are not just limited to targeting the refugee population, but that a number of robbery cases are also reported by members of host community. Rape and other sexual crimes including prostitution are common amongst refugees and sometimes sexually exploited by aid workers who were mostly employed from the community. Research has shown that this is not only unique to the Oru Camp and not new trend that host communities are accused by the refugee population (19.2%) of committing rape against women refugees.

The stakeholder’s analysis revealed that cheap labour is being supplied by the refugees to the host community. The community seems to be satisfied with the services of the refugees in terms of labour for domestic activities. That notwithstanding, 67% of the community people are of the strongest conviction that Oru Camp should be closed since Sierra Leone and Liberia now enjoy relative peace. Therefore refugees from the two countries must return to their countries of origin and be part of the developmental agenda of their countries. “Their presence is responsible for robbery and prostitution in the community “as opined by a community elder during a focus group discussion.

Land use seems to be the most controversial in the community and to a great extent responsible for dispute between host and refugee community. The community believes that land made available to the refugees was meant for productive agricultural activities rather than using it to extract wood as as for cooking. The community therefore sees refugees as lazy occupants of land with little benefit in terms of promoting economic activities in the community. This is reinforced by Bakar (1995) in which he emphasized that though there are costs in hosting refugees, the host community is interested in the benefits that accompany the opportunities extended to the suffering refugees. The absence of these benefits could lead to hostile relationship between refugees and host community. This is not manifested in the case of refugee-host relations in the Ogun State, Nigeria. The inability of the refugees to be engaged in productive economic activities in the state makes their financial positions to be very weak and pose no threat to the community. Contrary to the above, Harrel Bond (1986) was able to discover that financial strength of refugees in host communities may generate hostilities from the local community. This, if not managed, could lead to wide spread hostilities in the community, affecting national security of the state.

Assessment of Host–Refugee Relations

In assessing the refugee–host relations, 42.4% of refugees claim to have a good relationship with the community people. This is below average taking into account the fact that Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia have some form of similarities in terms of culture and tradition. In the case of Sierra Leone and
Nigeria, there is not much difference in the use of the common language, the pigeon English and the British English since the two countries were colonized by the British. Therefore, one could conclude that incidents of crime committed against refugees are isolated and occurred not often. Hostilities against refugees by members of the community accounts for 1.6%, which seem to be very low. This might not be unconnected to the fact that Nigerians are very close to Sierra Leone and Liberia and most Nigerian citizens who were businessmen in Sierra Leone and Liberian equally suffered in the hands of callous rebels.

Conclusion

Host-Refugee relations in Ogun State Nigeria seem to be cordial even though the refugees are very much unproductive when compared to refugees in Kenya. Inspite of the conviction of the host in relation to refugees not promoting economic activities in the form of concrete agricultural productivity, the refugees provide cheap labour to the community which the ordinary Nigerian citizen could not afford to render. The absence of integrating the refugees into the development agenda of the community has also exacerbated the problems of refugees not been able to contribute meaningfully to the development of the host community. There is therefore a need to integrate refugees into the development plans of the community so that the refugees see themselves as beneficiaries of community services. By doing so the full potentials of refugees could be realized by host communities and the sense of responsibility to host community on the part of the refugees could be reinforced while they stay in refugee camps.

Participating in agricultural activities as a major concern of the community is seen by the refugees as a non lucrative economic activity. The absence of a viable market in the community could be a major factor for the refugees not having interest in the farming activities that could lead to the production of food and other agricultural products. In almost every market in the community, imported food stuffs are the main goods on the shelves of market stalls.

Research findings also revealed that there is a gap in communication between the host community and the refugees in the Oru Camp. Community needs are not known to the refugees while the community seems not to regard or acknowledge problems facing the refugees. The major factor responsible for this abysmal situation is the absence of agencies responsible for coordinating refugee activities in the refugee camp. It is expected that the presence of agencies could forester mutual understanding between refugees and the host community and this would bring about common benefits. These agencies back out and stop support to the refugees as a result of the repatriation of Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees since 2002 and 2012 the latest in the case of Liberian refugees. Even though the community is poverty-stricken and has little resources and public services, crimes committed against each other are on the low side with cases of violations not frequently reported. The community therefore seems to be relatively in peace while the refugee situation for Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees continues on the camp. It is therefore obvious that the role played by Nigeria in the regional body of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) during the war in Sierra Leone and Liberia in bringing stability to the region is still continuing but this time in accommodating refugee camps. This could be as a result of the regional cooperation and similarities in language and other traditional and cultural characteristics.

References

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