

Enhancing the Educational Outcomes for South Sudanese Refugee Youth:

Laying the Groundwork for International Comparative Research

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Introduction

Education is not only a human right. It is also tool for peacebuilding. In 2019, Reuben Garang conducted a feasibility study with South Sudanese refugee families living in refugee camps in Uganda. Garang is a Canadian citizen and a former refugee originally from South Sudan. He was a South Sudanese child soldier in the 1980s and he lived in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya before he was resettled in Canada. This project and report were fueled by Garang’s own personal experiences with periods of interrupted schooling both in refugee camps and in Canada. And it was fueled by the fundamental insight that education can serve as a tool for peacebuilding and mutual understanding between groups that have survived displacement and conflict.

The intent behind this feasibility study was three-fold: to raise awareness of the devastating plight—yet continued resilience—of the South Sudanese, to collect information that would inform the development of the Education Pathways to Peace Project, and to set groundwork for comparative research by considering ways to enhance education outcomes for refugees living in camps and those who have been resettled. While the feasibility study’s intent was ambitious, through Garang’s observations of the refugee camps in Uganda, speaking with South Sudanese refugee families there, and sharing his findings upon his return to Manitoba, the study has acted, and will continue to act, as a launching point for future work.

The study targets four audiences. The first audience is comprised of existing project partners who have already contributed to this feasibility study. The second is comprised of existing and potential partners who are interested in contributing to the project’s growth and development. The third audience is the broad range of organizations and researchers interested in the relationship between education and peacebuilding and the possibilities for community development following displacement. The fourth is the wider international community and public, so as to familiarize them with the challenges facing South Sudanese refugee youth.

Education after Conflict and Displacement: The Possibilities for Peacebuilding

By providing a preliminary assessment of the situation of South Sudanese refugees in Ugandan refugee camps, this feasibility study is the first step in the development of a peace-based education system in Uganda that would support 24 South Sudanese students in achieving the equivalent of Grade 12 (known as Form 6 in Uganda), while also coaching their families on how to provide collective support. The feasibility study was therefore undertaken in order to assess the capacity to develop a peace-based education system in the region, to understand how such a system could foster societal cohesion and meaningful peace in the camp by addressing some of the challenges faced by South Sudanese refugee youth and their families, and to identify 24 South Sudanese students and their families that could participate in the project.

The Education Pathways to Peace Project is fueled by a passion for peacebuilding through education and projects that promote mutual understanding, and it has been inspired by other peace-related education work currently taking place in different parts of the world. **Humankind International**, a not-for-profit organization established in 2008 in Winnipeg, attends to the needs of economically disadvantaged local communities and refugee youth in Kenya. It is located at the outskirts of one of the largest refugee camps in Kenya, Dadaab Refugee Camp, and its fully supported school is attended by both the locals and refugee children. The school has become a symbol of sharing and understanding between the local and refugee communities.¹ The **School for Peace**, in Wahat Al-Salam-Neve Shalom, was established fifty years ago in Israel to provide education for Jewish and Palestinian women, youth, and professionals, while fostering peace between different ethnic groups. This is an independent school supported largely by peace lovers from around the world.² **Education for Peace** began in 2000 in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina as a means to foster peace amongst the region's highly conflicted ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. To do so it educates children

¹ More information about Humankind International can be found on their website: <http://humankindintl.org/>.

² More information about The School for Peace can be found on their website: <http://sfpeace.org/>.

and youth in schools within the framework of the universal principles of peace. The program's initial success has led to it being run in a small number of schools in Canada and the United States.³

This project and study can be understood in the context of Manitoban-based education research projects. For example, while examining the socioeconomic conditions and intergenerational trauma and its impact on the education of youth in Fisher River Cree Nation in the northern part of Manitoba, Mackinnon (2016) found that the provision of collective, holistic, and culturally appropriate supports had enabled students from the community-run school to achieve desired education outcomes. Bartlett (2016) also advocated the need for wraparound supports to be made available to Indigenous students experiencing trauma.

It is important to recognize that the particular circumstances of colonization, displacement, and dispossession continue to affect Indigenous communities' efforts towards improving educational outcomes. Nonetheless, the insight derived from Indigenous-led efforts can inform other attempts to improve the educational outcomes of displaced peoples, and the support and restoration of cultural integrity after displacement may be thought of as a commonly-shared objective. Education can be one tool to address the intergenerational effects of displacement.

South Sudanese youth in Ugandan refugee camps have experienced trauma, either during the war in South Sudan or while in the refugee camps. Similar to Indigenous and refugee students in Manitoba, South Sudanese students in the Ugandan refugee camps would benefit from wraparound supports. Moreover, as Ennab (2017) found in a case study involving refugee youth in Winnipeg, educational success of refugee youth can be enhanced by increasing parental involvement. In sum, when developing an education project for South Sudanese youth, it should be collective, holistic, and culturally appropriate. Including such supports and principles in the Education Pathways to Peace Project will contribute to its success.

³ More information about Education for Peace can be found on their website: <http://efpinternational.org/>.

Framework and Methodology

The information garnered for this study resulted from time spent by the project lead, in his capacity as Founder of Education Pathways to Peace: Canadian-led Global Project, in four refugee camps in Uganda from April 15 to May 20 of 2019. During his time in Uganda Garang leveraged his language abilities, cultural skills, and deep personal knowledge of the intercultural dynamics in the South Sudanese conflict. He was supported by a team of South Sudanese and Ugandan Church leaders under the leadership of Rev. James Baak Nhial of Solidarity Ministries Africa for Reconciliation & Development (SMARD). SMARD is a national faith-based, non-governmental peace and development organization that works with disadvantaged and displaced people in South Sudan and Ugandan refugee camps.

The feasibility study was conducted using a culturally-informed holistic framework which enables the assessment of core themes associated with community health at refugee camps. This framework enables a straightforward, empirically grounded, and cross-culturally robust basis for examining how local-level features support or inhibit educational initiatives, as well as community development, among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. The study also uses a community health approach which emphasizes lived experience and local knowledge as a basis for successful adaptation and survival under challenging circumstances.

As part of the holistic framework, the field-based observations and community consultations that were used to assess community resilience were informed by the “salutogenic” approach, guided by the three principle characteristics of health, first presented by Aaron Antonovsky (1979): comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness (as cited in Lindstrom & Eriksson, 2005).⁴ During the community consultations Garang was privy to the general situation in the refugee camps, and how individuals and families managed life and built meaningfulness under the difficult conditions found in the camps. While conducting the community consultations and field-based observations, Garang also assessed what material resources were required to support the Education Pathways to Peace Project.

⁴ See also Arnold, 2011; Antonovsky, 1987; Almedom, 2005, 2015; Erickson & Lindstrom, 2006.

Garang visited two of the 134 Ugandan districts during his visit to the four refugee camps. In the central district of Kiryandongo, which hosts 4.6% of the refugee population in Uganda, the researcher visited the Bweyale Refugee Camp. While in the northern area of Adjumani District, which hosts 16% of the refugee population, the project lead visited the Boroli, Mungula, and Ayilo Refugee Camps. South Sudan is inhabited by 64 different ethnic groups. Many of these different ethnic groups live in the same refugee camps in Uganda. Through his community consultations, Garang consulted with families from the following South Sudanese ethnic groups: Acholi, Bari, Collo, Dinka, Kakwa, Kuku, Luo (Jurchol), Ma'di, Murlei, Mundari, Nuer, and Nyangarwa.

Context of the Conflict in South Sudan

War not only destroys people's lives and their property, it also strains communal relationships, erodes trust, and turns people against one another along ethnic and political divides. War limits young people's access to education, which can be felt intergenerationally. The conflict in South Sudan exhibits these characteristics. Although it attained independence in 2011, South Sudan (as a region) has been rocked by decades of civil wars which began in 1955 but find their origin in colonization. Civil wars plagued the region from 1955–1972, from 1983–2005, and from 2013 to the present day. Millions have died due to these conflicts, including approximately 400,000 since 2013 (Checchi et al., 2018). There have also been reports of cases of child soldiers recruited and forced to fight in these conflicts. Global institutions responsible for crisis intervention have proven to be unwilling to stop or incapable of stopping the devastating plights of the South Sudanese. South Sudan faces “critical humanitarian funding shortfalls and mass food insecurity,” and, as of September 2018, only 33% of international appeals have been funded (Staedicke, 2018).

Moreover, the displacement of people from South Sudan necessitates planning and collective efforts. It is estimated that 4.3 million South Sudanese are displaced or living in refugee camps, 63% of which are children (UNHCR, 2019a). In 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) determined that there were 25.9 million refugees in the world and 45% of these are produced by only three countries: Syria (6.7 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), and South Sudan (2.3 million) (UNHCR, 2019b). After initial displacement, refugees overwhelmingly move to neighbouring “developing” countries as opposed to “developed” ones; the three top host countries include Turkey (3.7 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), and Uganda (1.2 million) (UNHCR, 2019b). It is estimated that there are 1.6 million South Sudanese refugees living in the neighbouring countries of Uganda and Sudan (UNHCR, 2019a). Many of the top host countries themselves face “their own displacement crises even as they simultaneously host refugees from the neighbouring counties” (Staedicke, 2018).

Approximately 800,000 of the 1.2 million refugees living in Uganda are South Sudanese (UNHCR, 2019b, 2019a). Many of these refugees are in protracted refugee situations,

meaning that they have been in exile from their home for five years or more, without the opportunity to return to South Sudan or to be resettled in another country. Therefore, many of the South Sudanese refugees living in Uganda are in limbo without the possibility of return or resettlement.

However, South Sudanese refugees continue to cross over the border into Uganda because of the war, famine, or both. Some of the individuals and families in the camps visited by Garang have been in the refugee camps since the 1980s. Some have gone back and forth between South Sudan and host countries following the peace cycles. Most of the individuals and families, however, came to Uganda after South Sudan's most recent civil war, which began in 2013. All of them—those who are new to the refugee camps and those who have been there for decades—are fed up with the war. They have one consistent message for the world, and Canada in particular: while they greatly appreciate any support that is provided for them, they eagerly want the world to support peace in South Sudan so they can return home. They are tired of being refugees. Many, if not most, have loved ones and families back in South Sudan, and some do not know where those family members and loved ones are or whether or not they are even alive.

Nevertheless, despite all the impacts of the civil wars, the South Sudanese people are resilient and hopeful. In situations of protracted displacement, they continue to strive to build communities out of necessity and the sense of hopefulness. For displaced South Sudanese, a protracted condition of precariousness and unsettledness disrupts the ability of youth to attain education. The challenges precipitated by such interrupted or otherwise insufficient education compound intergenerationally and afflict the people of South Sudan long after the initial violence and displacement has occurred.

Life in Ugandan Refugee Camps

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the social and economic conditions in the camps that South Sudanese refugees must contend with if they are to achieve positive educational outcomes. It demonstrates that a variety of social and economic needs must be accounted for amidst the pressing challenges that displaced peoples experience in daily life. Nonetheless, South Sudanese refugees demonstrate resilience under such circumstances.

Women of the Camps

The majority of those living in the refugee camps in question were women, youth, and children. Of the families Garang met with during his consultations 80% were headed by women. The majority of these women were single mothers and close to half of these heads of the family were grandmothers. Most of these families were large, consisting of more than 10 family members, and 90% of them included extended family members. These mothers are caring for their nieces, nephews, grandchildren, and children of their in-laws. In some cases, women may end up caring for children with whom they have no direct familial relations. For example, a woman may come to care for an orphan largely on the basis that she happens to speak the same language as them.

As such, women are overwhelmingly responsible for performing integral social and economic functions in the camps amidst myriad challenges. In addition to caring for extended family members and taking new family members under their care, women often cultivate small pieces of land for their families. They work at locals' farms to get small produce or firewood, and a few are even running small businesses. Others are forced to sell their UNHCR-provided food in order to pay the school fees for their kids. Some tend to these responsibilities while having also experienced physical abuse. These women are responsible, caring, stressed, and worried, while at the same time extremely resilient, prayerful, and hopeful.

Basic Needs

Garang observed that many people living in the refugee camps were emaciated. They wore stress on their faces, especially those who lived in the refugee camps for many years. The

basic needs of many of the refugees were not being adequately met, particularly their food, water, healthcare, and shelter needs. The main source of food was provided by UNHCR, however it was unreliable. Sometimes the food did not come on time or there was not enough, leaving many residents of the camp hungry. Water supply was also limited in some of the refugee camps and access to basic healthcare was scarce. Families were concerned about depression and mental health as there were reported cases of suicides.

Housing was another area of concern. While the UNHCR provided plastic sheets for roofing, they did not provide enough poles and other materials needed to put up adequate shelters for the families. The plastic sheets provided terrible shelter in regions with a high intensity of rain and wind, often blowing away easily, sometimes while the families slept underneath them.

Different Ethnic Groups within the Refugee Camps

Garang observed that families generally felt more at ease in the refugee camps as they were relatively peaceful compared to South Sudan. Being exposed to families and individuals from other ethnic groups was, more often than not, a positive experience: listening to people speak other languages, having their children exposed to other South Sudanese cultures, and the general peacefulness of the camp compared to South Sudan all made for positive experiences with different ethnic groups.

While there was less violence in the refugee camps compared to the civil war, animosity and distrust towards different ethnic groups remained evident. People still had fresh memories of destruction of all forms from the conflict, and since the conflict continued back home it was difficult to leave those feelings outside of the refugee camps. While the camp was peaceful for many, there was still tension between the different South Sudanese ethnic groups due to the emotional baggage that came with experiencing war. Education can serve as a means to enhance positive interactions between different ethnic groups and facilitate the addressing of tensions carried over from the civil war.

Tensions with Local Ugandans

Local Ugandans, just like the refugees, need resources for their own survival. The part of Uganda that Garang visited was not developed. Local residents lived off the land. They used local trees and grasses for building, as well as firewood for cooking. When the refugees first arrived, the locals welcomed them and allowed them to use their local resources and materials. However, as environmental degradation took place, local resources and materials became more and more scarce. This limited amount of resources

and materials, coupled with the locals starting to charge money for the resources they previously provided for free (as they too needed money) created tensions between the refugees and the local Ugandans. This brewing tension has jeopardized the communal relationship between the refugees and locals, and is likely to get worse as further environmental degradation continues to threaten the local resources and materials.

Local courts have been established that are served by elders from both refugee and local communities. The courts are always flooded with cases of conflict between refugees (individuals or communities) and locals Ugandans. The main cause of tension that results in sporadic conflicts is over local resources such as grasses for thatching, trees for building, and firewood. Refugees prefer to build their homes using the local grasses or iron sheets as compared to the plastic sheets provided by the UN, most of which are not affordable for refugees. As a result, the refugees are forced to look for building materials and firewood in the locals' villages or communities.

Hopefulness and Resilience

Despite the above-noted challenges, the refugee camps are also home to high levels of human decency. Sharing and moral support amongst the refugees amazed the researcher. The refugees were strong-willed, welcoming, and family-centred. While they continuously faced problems in their lives, they were determined to overcome those issues. They were full of hope and courage. Many turned to their faith as a form of strength. These attributes enable those in camps to live meaningful lives. While thinking about the future, people were full of hope for better days ahead and wanted to do everything they could for a better future for their children. They were resilient, and it is this resilience that can be supported and enhanced by a peace-based education system. Such a system can mitigate the intergenerational transference of trauma and hostilities resulting from war.

Education

EDUCATION IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS

Access to basic education is a human right. However, in 2017 UNICEF reported that 72% of South Sudanese youth are not in primary school, making it the country with the highest out-of-school rate in the world (UN News, 2017). The out-of-school rate for South Sudanese girls was even higher at 76% (UN News, 2017). Similarly, in 2018 UNESCO reported that 2.2 million of South Sudanese children have no access to education. These statistics were observed as a reality during the researcher's visit to the refugee camps. Most of the schools that existed were run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) contracted by the UNHCR. Classes

were overwhelmingly packed with a high number of students, sometimes between 100–300 students. Local Ugandans are mainly responsible for the education system, with some schools attended by both local and refugee children. The quality of the education was very low, and the schools lacked resources, teachers, and adequate facilities. There were added barriers for female students as they were concerned about walking long distances to get to school due to a fear of being physically or sexually assaulted.

In addition to enormous class sizes, lack of resources, and safety concerns, most schools only went up to Primary 7 (which is equivalent to middle school). There are very few secondary schools available for the refugee students, and in some camps there were none at all. The result is an often overwhelming barrier to learning and promising futures for the refugee youth living in these camps. Those who manage to finish Primary 7 may easily lose the knowledge they gained if they never access school again or if they have to wait years before they re-enter school. Interrupted schooling is a harsh reality for many of these youth.

School fees can be a major concern of many of the refugee families. While NGOs run the schools with funding from UNHCR, the school administration impose fees on families for exams, certificates, and development funds. However, these fees add up and many families are unable to pay them on time, especially when multiple fees are due at the same time. Many families sell their food rations to pay the fees or in some cases take their children out of school to work on the farm or collect firewood to make money for the family. Some youth also take care of their younger or elderly family members rather than attend school, often feeling pressured into taking on such family responsibilities.

However, the youth in these camps, like any other young people, have hopes and dreams. In the face of all these barriers, they are determined to pursue education. Most families at the refugee camps put their hope in the education of their children, seeing it as creating a future for their children and families. Nonetheless, such a sense of hopefulness must contend with the realities of the poor education systems that await South Sudanese refugee children living in refugee camps in Uganda.

Having the futures of such a large number of children jeopardized by the inadequacies of the education systems available to them negatively impacts society in the camps. While living in a refugee camp is disruptive enough for a young refugee's life, not having access to adequate primary education and no access at all to secondary schooling creates barriers to learning, future employment, and the ability to attend post-secondary education. These youth also become easy targets to manipulate into engaging in military conflict if they are not given educational opportunities. Furthermore, if these youth are resettled in another country, such as Canada, their interrupted schooling severely impacts their learning journey as shown in a recent study (Jowett et. al., forthcoming) conducted on older refugee youth in Winnipeg.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

Life in the refugee camps demonstrates the struggles experienced by the South Sudanese refugees, but also the hope and resiliency that the community has for their youth and for peace in South Sudan.

This report has sought to consider the realities of the existing education system available to South Sudanese refugees in Ugandan refugee camps. Moving forward requires an answer to the following question: would families support their children being put in cohorts with children from other ethnic groups as a way to achieve both education and peace? Through his consultations, the project lead observed that the parents had positive feelings towards educational projects advancing peace among refugees. Parents and families were very supportive of creating an education system for children of diverse ethnic backgrounds to learn together. Families saw it as a way to create opportunities to understand one another's pain, diminish tribal hatred, and create real relationships and spaces for communities to heal together.

As a result, there is considerable potential for this type of project to contribute to a better future for South Sudanese refugee youth and their country, while also contributing to an authentic, “bottom-up” peace originating in the population rather than in government or international institutions. An education system that involves previously-divided communities can foster relationships, networks, and connections that have positive long-term implications. Children can realize their own potential with a full appreciation of the strength of diversity. For a durable peace to come to war-torn South Sudan, youth need to be prepared for peace, and education is the tool to prepare them. And while people in camps are still hurting and wary of the ways in which a project such as this one may be implicated in larger political realities, creating space in both local and global contexts for such education is a crucial next step.

Education Pathways to Peace Project Recommendations

The study is a preliminary step towards enhancing the organizational capacity behind the Education Pathways to Peace Project. It demonstrates the need for the project,

presents options for its development, and reflects preliminary connections made between the project lead and numerous families.

With the above in mind the following recommendations support the development of the Project:

1. The Education Pathways to Peace Project must both address the education crises for the youth and continue researching the situation of South Sudanese refugee youth. This necessitates mobilization of financial resources to establish the first cohort of the project with a few families, and additional families as resources become available.
2. The Education Pathways to Peace Project should conduct comprehensive research into how to use education as a means for peacebuilding in the case of South Sudan, where the civil war has tribal overtones. Findings should be used to support the students involved in the project and should be scaled up to support further peace-based work for South Sudan.

Further Research Recommendations

The study also creates opportunities for mutual learning and the groundwork for comparative research. Just as Manitoba-based research on education provided insight for this feasibility study, the study's findings can enrich local and international research and has established the groundwork for future comparative research related to education and peace work in local Manitoban urban, rural, and remote communities. The findings are transferable to broader educational issues pertaining to refugees, migration, and community-driven interventions for peace-related work. Research-related recommendations that came from this feasibility study include:

1. The Education Pathways to Peace Project and its partners should identify interested Manitoba-based researchers to conduct comparative peace-based education research between displaced and resettled refugees and communities that are underserved by existing educational systems in Manitoba.
2. The Education Pathways to Peace Project should collaborate with global researchers to do comparative research on the educational experience of resettled refugee youth and its impact on their settlement and integration in western societies.

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About the Authors

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Contributions

This feasibility study has been supported by many organizations and research networks, including: the Community Engaged Research on Immigration Network (CERI Network); the Migration in Remote and Rural Areas (MIRRA) Network; Immigration Partnership Winnipeg; the Canadian Mennonite University (CMU); the Rotary Club of Winnipeg (District 5550 World Peace Partners Committee); the University of Winnipeg; and the Manitoba Research Alliance (MRA). Their contributions of financial assistance and knowledge have made possible this opportunity for global knowledge sharing and networking on peace work, education, and migration.

Thank you to Amanda Carvalho for providing design, layout, and formatting, to Kathy Jaworski for providing transcription services, and to Scott Crompton for copy editing this report.



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