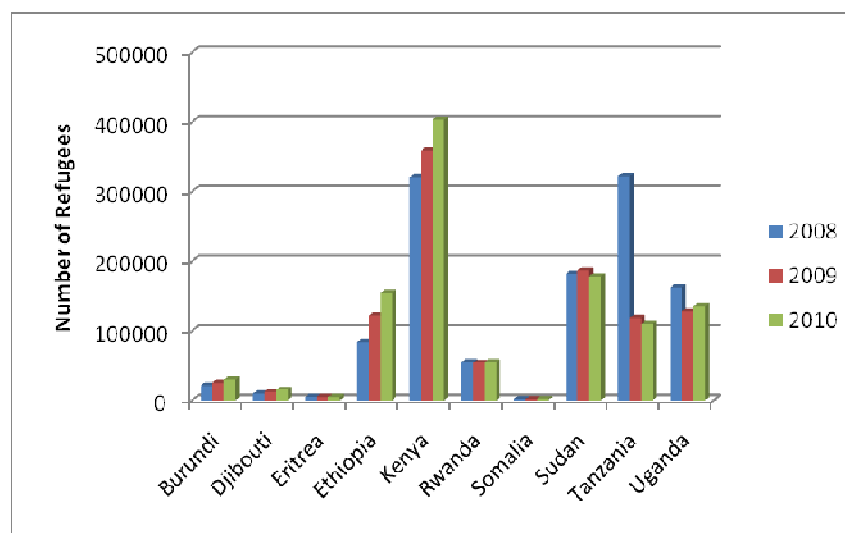


## Children and Youth Bulge: Challenges of a Young Refugee Population in the East and Horn of Africa

### Introduction:

The East and Horn of Africa is one of the biggest refugee-hosting regions in the world, with over a million refugees in the past 3 years. This has resulted from enormous conflicts in countries like Somalia, DR Congo and Sudan that has influenced the continuous displacement of populations across borders. The biggest recipients of refugee populations include Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda (Figure 1) as a result of their proximity to the highly volatile countries. The relatively stable countries like Kenya and Uganda continue to receive new arrivals seeking asylum.

Figure 1: Trend in Refugee Population in the East and Horn of Africa, 2008-2010<sup>1</sup>



### Data Sources:

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) runs a routine data collection system on a number of demographic indicators from over 150 countries in the world hosting refugees and other displaced populations. This quarterly statistical data collection process includes strict verifications through a multitude of UNHCR country and field offices distributed across these countries, and all this is based on an electronic registration and verification system (including biometrics) of refugees, asylum seekers and other population of concern. This enables determination of the origin and location of refugees of several nationalities across the world, including their magnitude and demographic characteristics.

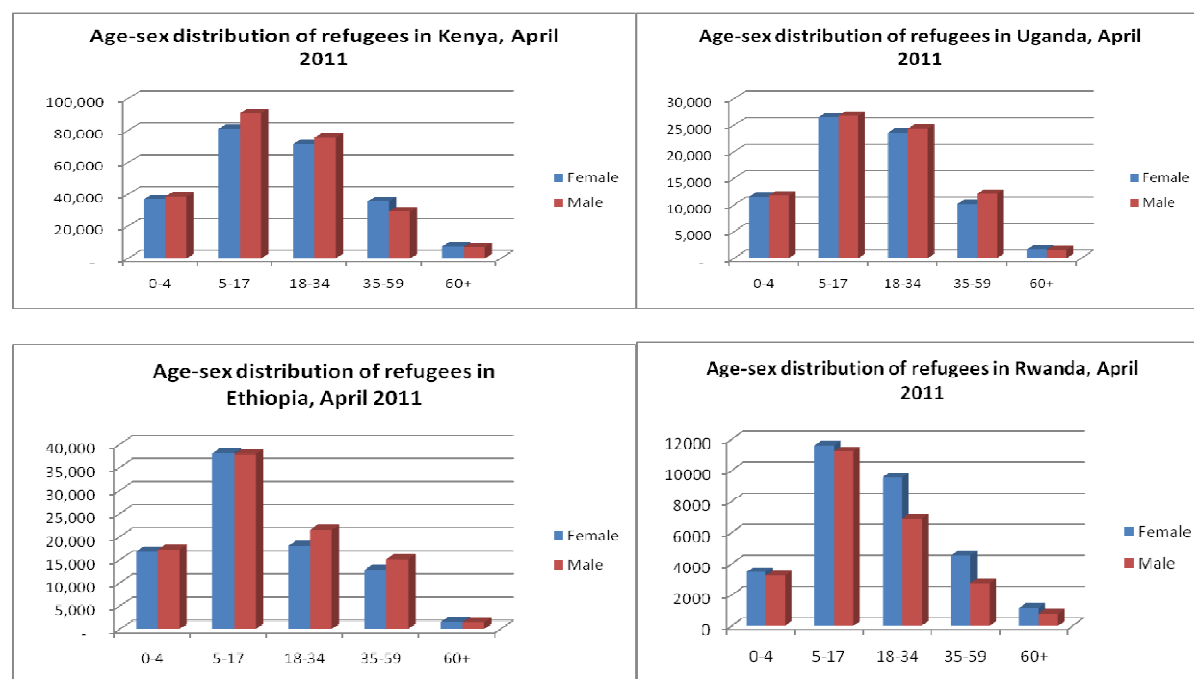
On top of this, an annual monitoring and evaluation tool is used by UNHCR offices across the world to assess a range of protection and assistance indicators in locations hosting refugees, internally displaced persons and other populations of concern to the Office. Based on this detailed information, it is easy to assess a range of aspects with regard to the refugees' quality of life, employment, access to social services, etc. and enjoyment of human rights prescribed in a number of international refugee conventions and protocols.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Annual Statistics Reports: 2008-2010

### **Refugee population structure:**

The structure of the refugee population across the region tends to be similar. Children and young adults of both sexes tend to contribute over 80% of the total refugee population. In most countries in the region, children in the school-going ages of 5 to 17 years constitute the majority, followed by young adults (youth) aged 18 to 34 years; males in these age groups tend to be slightly more than the females.

*Figure 2: Refugee population Structure: case studies of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Rwanda*



### **Implications of the children and youth bulge:**

The majority of refugee populations are hosted in camps set up by host governments and ran by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its partners to provide the necessary protection and assistance to this rather vulnerable population. Additionally, in many of the countries in the region, governments allow some refugees to stay in towns and again UNHCR with its partners run some urban refugee programmes to assist this group until durable solutions become available. The urban based refugees represent a significantly smaller proportion of refugees in any of the countries.

*Figure 2* demonstrates that the majority of the refugee population in the region are children and the youth who are most likely to miss out on crucial opportunities in the early ages.

### **Education**

Having a large number of refugee children population increase the demand for child and youth services. Among these, the most important is education. In the refugee camps in the region, only about 53% and 17% of the eligible population can access primary and secondary school education respectively,

provided by UNHCR, the host governments and other partners<sup>2</sup>. The gender divide in accessing education is that 64% of girls access primary education but it drops to 14% at the secondary level, a significant drop but also comparative to the drop in enrolment of boys. Host countries in the region are struggling to achieve the millennium development goal on universal primary education for their child population and provide support to refugees, which may differ from one country to another. Such support has traditionally included access to government schools, facilitating exam registration and supervision. UNHCR and its partners also give priority to primary education of refugee children. None the less, the combination of education assistance from governments and UNHCR with the resources raised by the donor community usually does not cope with the ever increasing refugee children population in the host countries even for the primary education level. In so doing, opportunities for secondary education usually become very limited in refugee camps and are usually sponsored by a few scholarships provided by development partners like Jesuit Refugee Services, Norwegian Refugee Council and a few others. Community schools also provide significant contributions to refugee education for example in one location in Rwanda, 3 of 6 secondary schools were managed by the refugee community.

### ***Employment***

In most of the countries in the region (Ethiopia, Kenya, etc.), engagement in gainful employment or agricultural production is prohibited for asylum seekers and refugees. This is as a result of the few employment opportunities available in the countries, even for the nationals. There is an exception of Uganda's strategy which provides land to refugees to cultivate and some of them have been able to produce beyond subsistence needs and been able to sell the produce. Some few refugees are sometimes employed by implementing partners in the refugee camps as incentive workers (clerks, interpreters, casual labourers, etc.), while a few opportunities for petty trade are available to refugees, especially in the urban centres. As a way to address this challenge, a number of partners have set up income generating schemes to benefit refugees and enable them to gain some form of self reliance (for instance, assistance to set up income generating activities has been provided in refugee camps by the Red Cross in Sudan and Jesuit Refugee Services in Ethiopia), but these are usually on a small scale due to resource constraints.

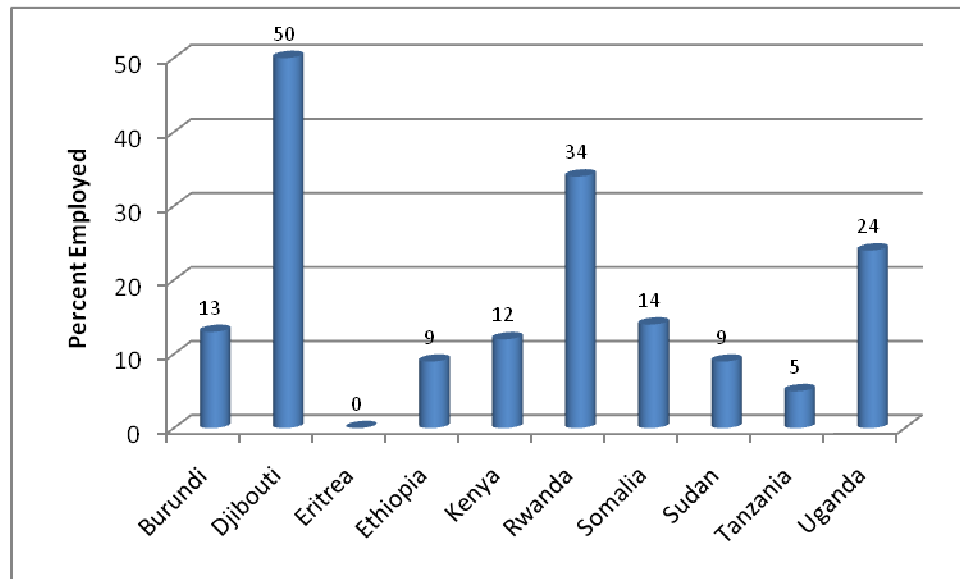
In a few locations, refugees may be contracted on a casual basis to work on some farms owned by the host communities or as domestic workers and gain some wages, although this is usually considered an illegal activity in most countries and discouraged by the authorities. Formal employment for refugees with professional skills (teachers, health workers, accountants, etc.) would normally require work permits from the authorities, but these are usually not forthcoming due to official government restrictions in the host countries. Rwanda is one country in the region that allows refugees to engage in gainful employment, but because such opportunities are limited even for nationals, only 34% of the working age population among the refugees have been able to work<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Annual Standards and Indicators Reports, UNHCR 2010

<sup>3</sup> Annual Standards and Indicators Report for UNHCR Rwanda, 2010

Figure 3: Refugees of Working Age Employed or Self-employed (engaged in IGAs) during 2010



#### ***Vocational skills and other targeted programmes***

Due to the limited opportunities for further education for children that complete primary education and for youth who have missed all education altogether, UNHCR and its partners have come up with a set of targeted programmes for adolescents to enable them develop into responsible adults and advance their usefulness in society as durable solutions are sought. Such programmes usually include packages that may include components like sports and health activities, targeted programmes for teenage girls like cookery, sensitisation activities on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health, community gardens and other socio-cultural activities. Resource constraints and limited expertise in refugee camps to run such programmes is usually the main challenge to implementation and available data shows that on average, only about 23% of the adolescents aged 12 to 17 years were reached through these targeted programmes in the region during 2010.

Another targeted intervention has been the provision of non-formal training and vocational skills to teenagers and young adult refugees by UNHCR and its partners. This is a programme that is still in an infancy stage; on average, only 4% of the target population aged 15 to 24 years in the region were enrolled in vocational skills training during 2010.

#### ***Official documentation***

The large number of children in the refugee population has implications for the realisation to the right to birth registration and certification. Birth registration establishes proof of age and identity, and provides children with a degree of protection against child labour, early marriage, illegal adoption, sexual exploitation, recruitment into armed forces/groups and trafficking. The realization of this right for refugee children remains a challenge with 27% of camps reporting that all newborns were registered and issued with a birth certificate. Only 42% of urban programmes reported that all newborn babies were issued with birth certificates. With the increasing number of children, resources to allocate to birth

certification will increase on systems already unable to meet the realisation of this right for refugees. The impact of non-registration and lack of birth certificates leads to the risk of causing statelessness, may limit access to health and education. In the long run, this further exposes the child to the risk of exploitation and abuse.

***Conclusions and way forward:***

This short article demonstrates the magnitude of the refugee problem in the East and Horn of Africa, especially the big young population with limited opportunities to maximise their potential. The continued lack of opportunities for this ever growing population in refugee camps and urban centres remains a challenge that calls for significant interventions to progressively address the gaps and restore their hope for the future. It should be noted that voluntary repatriation for the refugee population to their countries of origin is usually hampered by continuing lack of stability, peace or key resources like land in the region and additionally, there exist few opportunities for other durable solutions (local integration, resettlement or naturalisation). All these factors facilitate the protracted nature of refugee populations in the region and therefore interventions should be designed to address the problem in its current form.

Specifically, more resources should be availed to the education sector to enable universal access by all refugee children; for instance, education budgets for host countries should be facilitated by the international community to cater for all the child population, including refugees. This would be the best way to achieve the millenium development goals. Furthermore, advocacy by the international community should be strengthened to facilitate the easing of restrictions in host countries for refugees to access informal or formal employment opportunities and in so doing contribute to the economies of the region.