

Full Length Research Paper

Higher education for refugees, returnees and host communities: Reflections on the Djibouti declaration of IGAD and its ramifications for sustainable development

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This paper argues that access to quality education and skills development programs for refugees, returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is not only one of the fundamental human rights that states and non-state actors have obligations to fulfill; it is also an integral part of sustainable development efforts which will have significant contributions to socio-economic transformation in host countries, countries of origin and countries of destinations in the event that refugees become migrant, which is sometimes the case. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region, consisting of eight member states, namely, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda, host more than 13 million forcibly displaced people. This results from protracted and devastating conflicts; drought and famine and other natural or man-made calamities. Within the IGAD region, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan produce 80 to 90% of displacement due to protracted civil wars. However, almost all the member states have refugees, IDPs or migrants sheltered in their territories. Access to higher education among refugees, returnees and IDPs is very low at only 3% compared to 36% globally. The figure for Africa is still dismal, at less than 1%; and the same holds true for the IGAD region. In an effort to address this major challenge facing these population categories, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) convened a high level regional (Ministerial Conference) on refugee education held in Djibouti, 12-14 December 2017. That Conference adopted what is now called the Djibouti declaration and Plan of Action for refugee education in the IGAD region. The major purpose of this paper was is to outline the refugee situations in general and the state of higher education in the region in particular.

Key words: Higher education, refugees, returnees, host communities, Djibouti declaration, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The IGAD region, consisting of eight member states, namely, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda, hosts more than 7.5 million

Forcibly displaced people (4.5 million refugees and 8.5 million IDPs). This results from protracted and devastating conflicts; drought and famine and other natural or man-

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made calamities. Within the IGAD region, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan produce 80 to 90% of the refugees and IDPs due to the protracted/on-going civil wars in the two countries. However, almost all the member states have refugees, IDPs or migrants sheltered in their territories. The region has a population of more than 250 million people accounting for a quarter of the population of the continent. With a population of over a 100 million, Ethiopia alone contributes to 40% of the regional total. On average, 60 to 65% of the population consists of the youth and school age children. The region is also characterized by high level of poverty, frequent drought and famine owing to climate change and global warming. All these contribute to frequent competition for scarce resources and protracted conflicts. Almost all the member states of IGAD have been/are involved in several internal or external conflicts. Some of these have lasted for decades. The terrible civil wars that quickly come to mind were between Ethiopia and Eritrea; South Sudan and Sudan; and Somalia, Sudan (notably Darfur) and Uganda (Lord's Resistance Army). These and many other skirmishes have produced millions of refugees, IDPs, and forced migration in and outside of the region. The key commitments on which the Djibouti Declaration was based included: Agenda 2063 of the African Union as a collective aspiration of "the African We Want" as well as the decadal policies, strategies and plans of action derived from it; the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG4, which contains targets on inclusive and quality education; and another UN initiative: the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (UNHCR, 2017).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The thrust of this paper is not much on the root causes of conflicts or civil wars that lead to displacement and refugee. Nor will it focus on the long list of social problems emanating from conflicts, which could be a legitimate subject of another paper. As clearly suggested by the title, the three interrelated concerns of this paper were: access to quality higher education by refugees, returnees, IDPs and host communities; regional approaches to ensure access to education as illustrated in the Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education (IGAD, 2017b); and the role of higher education institutions in general and private higher education institutions in particular in providing access and ensuring quality education for refugees, returnees and host communities. These issues were discussed in the context of major regional and global commitments to provide education to all for inclusive and sustainable development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used here is largely descriptive and content or

context analysis. The material is derived from desk review and a detailed review of the literature, regional and international commitments, mainly decisions, declarations, etc. One of these sources is the Djibouti declaration on education for refugees, returnees and host communities adopted in December 2017. The other sources of information include the African Union Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goal, particularly Goal4 which deals with inclusive and equitable access to education. More importantly, since the paper deals with refugees, the UNHCR education strategy 2016 was consulted. The analysis focused on the status of refugee education in the IGAD region and the implication of higher education of refugees for sustainable development. This exercise is expected to serve as a basis for future research. As pointed out above, the study focuses on refugees, returnees and host communities as special population groups. Of the 26.6 million refugees globally, only 3% has access to higher education (UNHCR, 2021). The method employed was descriptive context analysis. In Africa, the overall university enrollment is less than 5% (Harvard University, 2006), whereas those of refugees' access to tertiary education accounts for 1%, far below the global average of 36% (UNHCR, 2020). The major refugee hosting countries in Africa in general and the IGAD region in particular did not have a clear policy and strategy on access to higher education by refugees, returnees and IDPs. This is often a neglected area since much focus, even for nationals, has been placed on universal primary and secondary education. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) scarcely mention higher education as a target to be met by member states of the UN. This neglect has been somehow rectified in the SDGs which, under Goal 4, Considers quality tertiary education and inclusive development as major requirements for the attainment of the SDGs. Therefore, though refugees do not receive explicit coverage in the SDGs, the emphasis on inclusiveness and leaving no one behind capture the specific needs of refugees, returnees and IDPs.

DISCUSSION

Key elements of the Djibouti declaration

The Djibouti Declaration emanated from a three-day Conference of IGAD ministers in charge of education held in Djibouti from 12 to 14 December 2017. The Conference was organized by IGAD in partnership with the UNHCR, EU, and GIZ and attended by representatives from the seven IGAD member states, international institutions and civil society organizations in the region, Africa, Europe and North America. The theme of this Conference was "Regional Quality Education Standards and Inclusion into National Systems for Refugee Children in Line with the UN Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), SDG4 and Agenda 2063 on Education". This shows very clearly that education for refugees, returnees and host communities is a development issue for two major reasons. First, societies cannot claim to have achieved development without ensuring the right to access to education and skills building opportunities to their citizens. The right to education at all levels by all is a gateway to a meaningful enjoyment of other rights. Second, access to quality education, as shown in the relevant sections above, is a critical instrument for sustainable development. In conflict and post-conflict situations,

educating refugees is believed to have considerable implications in resolving conflicts, rebuilding shattered socio-economic infrastructures and lives, enhancing reconciliation processes, building peace and preventing relapse to conflicts given the fact that educated citizens together with other segments of the society, notably elders and religious leaders, can help create better understanding and enabling conditions for peace and development. In this context, the IGAD Summit of Heads of State and Government held in March 2017, commits member states to “Enhance education, training and skills development for refugees to reduce their dependence on humanitarian assistance, and prepare them for gainful employment in host communities and upon return” (IGAD, 2017a). Regional Economic Communities like IGAD understood their catalytic role in terms of fulfilling the rights of individuals or groups on the one hand and contributing to the successful realization of regional and global initiatives for sustainable development, on the other. It is in this context that IGAD took-up the responsibility to promote education for refugees, returnees and host communities as outlined in the Djibouti Declaration. Refugee affairs, including education, being cross-border or transnational require: (a) a shared vision, (b) collective responsibilities, (c) collaborative efforts and (d) pooled resources. These are the major assumptions underlying the Djibouti Declaration whose key elements are outlined thus:

Regional education quality standards

Refugees stay in the host country for an extended period of time, on average up to 11 years. Though a limited percentage of the refugee youths receive education, they face several challenges in terms of quality and relevance of their education. Host countries follow curricula and educational systems which is different from the countries of origin. When refugees either return home or migrate to other countries, they face difficulties in getting their educational certificates accredited or accepted. This problem discourages others from pursuing education. Those who undergo certain levels of training would consider their years in school as wasted. This problem cannot be addressed by individual countries and, hence the need for a regional approach. The Djibouti Declaration commits member states to “Establish regional minimum education standards and targets with access and delivery of quality education for ... higher education including Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and education for people with special needs to benefit refugees, returnees, and host communities in order to maximize learning outcomes” (IGAD, 2017b). Doing so is believed to contribute to refugees’ access not only to quality education but also to learning outcomes that will be recognized by countries of origin, hosting countries or other countries in the region.

In the final analysis, educational achievements recognized by these countries could also meet global standards facilitating their acceptance outside the region as well building confidence among students and/or graduates.

Regional skills development for refugees

Higher education provides opportunities to specialize in different disciplines. Some of them help to develop skills and competencies whereas others offer generalized orientation in the sense of learning to learn. Skills can be acquired from either experience or specialized training programs from a given institution with purposely designed modules. Skills are essential to perform certain tasks or provide services. Regional skills development programs for refugees involve coordination of efforts of member states, identifying skills gaps (needs assessment), inventory of skills and competencies existing in different countries to see if there would be possibilities for cross-fertilization and exchanges. It also enables best practices in delivery methods, regulatory frameworks to recognize qualifications and in putting quality assurance systems in place. These require considerable investment and follow-up. In this regard, the Djibouti declaration urges: local and international partners to provide sustained and increased support for infrastructure and capacity building for skills development, particularly in refugee-hosting countries; and match skills training to job opportunities in the IGAD region in order to enable access to secure livelihoods, self-reliance and dignified work for refugees as provided for in the 1951 Refugee Convention (IGAD, 2017a). Given the fact that refugees stay in concentrated locations for a long period of time, it is possible to achieve this objective of developing employability skills among refugees, returnees, and host communities through regional cooperation.

Inclusion of refugees education in national education systems

The experience of many countries in the past shows that refugees receive education as outsiders in a manner perceived appropriate for the refugees. Recent studies emphasize the need for integrating refugees into national education systems to ensure consistency and sustainability. The Djibouti declaration echoes this when it urges member states to “integrate education for refugees and returnees into National Education Sector Plans by 2020; enhance the capacity of IGAD Member States to integrate education for refugees and returnees into national education system; and ensure the protection of refugees in national education systems particularly refugee and returnee children and their psycho-social well-being through a multi-sectoral approach”.

Financing, partnership and monitoring

Financing education in general and refugees' education in particular is one of the challenges facing developing countries. Budgetary allocations for the latter mostly come from humanitarian assistance, often inadequate and time-bound. The debate on keeping the balance between humanitarian supports and investing in long-term development sectors including education in crisis and post-crisis situations still rages. Donors usually respond to emergencies. States struggle with competing priorities to spend their meager resources. This poses a formidable impediment for specific group of populations such as refugees who are often sheltered in communities with weak and poorly developed infrastructures and facilities. Addressing this challenge calls for coordinated and collaborative efforts by different actors and stakeholders. The Djibouti Declaration articulated this need and urged governments to "Commit to developing cost, long-term refugee education response strategies, as part of national education sector plans based on a comprehensive mapping of current and emerging resources and call upon humanitarian and development partners to support this process." The Declaration also "Urge[d] International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and bilateral, regional and international partners, in the spirit of responsibility sharing, to increase multi-year, predictable and sustainable support to IGAD and its Member States to ensure refugee and host community children and youth have greater access to and quality education ..." (IGAD, 2017b).

Linkage between higher education and sustainable development

Higher education institutions in both the private and public sector are expected to play significant roles in ensuring equitable access to education for all. They have the mandate to develop the requisite skills, competencies and the knowledge-base for the successful implementation of the SDGs. However, refugees and IDPs have very limited access to higher education. Therefore, special attention should be given to populations in difficult circumstances such as refugees and hard-to-reach peripheral communities, where often refugees are accommodated. The role of education in socio-economic development has long been recognized quite early in the history of emerging Africa from the yoke of colonialism. The 1961 Addis Ababa Conference on the Development of Education in Africa underlined the "... vital importance of education as an investment in any programme of economic and social development, and the need for a close link between educational planning and overall development planning" (UNESCO and UNECA, 1961). This theme of education for development continued to be the major pre-occupation for post-independence and contemporary Africa as well. The

Founding Conference of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in May 1963 called for strong educational and cultural cooperation amongst the newly independent African States both to broker socio-economic development and also enhance regional integration by breaking "... down linguistic barriers and promote understanding amongst the people of the continent" (OAU, 1963). The Second Decade of Education of the African Union ((AU) 2006-2015) and its operational Plan of Action considers higher education as one of the seven areas of focus as both a field of development and a critical tool for sustainable development. This emphasis on higher education was further capitalized in the Continental Strategy for Education in Africa (CESA) for 2016-2025 of the African Union which states that "Virtually all development players now concur that for any meaningful and sustainable economic growth to be realized and sustained, tertiary education must be centrally placed in the development agenda of nations" (AU, 2016). Of course, this assertion is firmly based on the priorities identified by Agenda 2063 of the Union which embodies the vision for collective aspiration of the "Africa We Want" (AU, 2013). Other international institutions have confirmed the place of higher education in delivering rapid and sustainable development. The World Bank Group Education Strategy 2020 underlined the need for inclusive education which is firmly grounded on the Bank's conviction that "Educated individuals are more employable, able to earn higher wages, cope better with economic shocks and raise healthier children" (World Bank, 2021). When this notion of education for a better life is extended to forcibly displaced population it means a lot. For this category of population education in general and higher education in particular creates the capacity to understand the root causes of displacement, builds power of resilience and problem-solving, contributes to conflict-resolution, reconciliation and provides skills needed for post-conflict reconstruction and recovery. Indeed, during their stay in the host countries, educated refugees could participate actively in economic and social development provided that they are given the opportunity to do so.

Higher education for refugees in IAGD Region

Access to education including higher education is both a fundamental human right enshrined in global, regional and national legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on Peoples and Human Rights, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and several other legal frameworks (Lee, 2013). The World Declaration on Higher Education of UNESCO (1998) stressed, among others, that: *Access to higher education for members of some special target groups, such as indigenous peoples, cultural and linguistic minorities, disadvantaged groups, peoples living*

under occupation and those who suffer from disabilities, must be actively facilitated, since these groups as collectivities and as individuals may have both experience and talent that can be of great value for the development of societies and nations. Special material help and educational solutions can help overcome the obstacles that these groups face, both in accessing and in continuing higher education.

Though refugees are not mentioned here, perhaps, for lack of awareness on special higher education needs of this category of the population which could be explained in terms of universities not having focused their attention on displaced population as important targets for higher education, the general reference to „disadvantaged groups“, could also be extended to cover refugees, returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

According to the World Bank (2017) “Higher education can make an important contribution to building a stronger society, ending extreme poverty, and boosting shared prosperity. It can serve the community by contributing knowledge and advanced skills as well as basic competencies and research. Knowledge plays a growing role in the global economy, driving economic growth and productivity. Economic studies have shown a positive relationship between education and economic growth, particularly those that take into account the quality of education. Higher Education fulfills multiple roles that go beyond educating students.” The Bank further pointed out that to respond to the challenges faced by society, “higher education needs to address: (i) the growing demand for higher education; (ii) the role of access, including equity; (iii) the quality and relevance of teaching and its implications for employability; (iv) the role of research and development in higher education; and (v) the role of systems reform within higher education” (World Bank, 2017). There is also a strong correlation between higher education and economic development. The rapid growth in Asian and Latin American over the last three to four decades and in recent years in Africa is associated with the expansion of higher education.

Realizing this transformative role of higher education in Africa, Agenda 2063 of the African Union envisions that “at least 70% of all high-school graduates will go on to have tertiary education, with 70% of those graduating in subjects related to science and technology” (Chipperfield, 2016). Refugees’ access to higher education is very low in the IGAD region. Ethiopia is one of the few countries to establish a specific target for increasing refugees’ enrolment in higher education. In March, 2017, it announced its intention to increase refugees’ enrolment in higher education from 1,600 to 2,500. Kenya is committed to continued access to the education system, schools and training institutions for refugees (IGAD, 2017).

The IGAD member states are at different stages of incorporating refugee education into their national education programs. Before the adoption of the Djibouti

Declaration in December 2017, some of them do not even make reference to „refugee“ in their education plans. As a result, it was very difficult to find solid empirical evidence on the state of refugee education in these countries. Even those that have made reference to refugee education in their education sector plans have it either as a passing remark or as a separate chapter with no solid statistical data. This calls for the development of a strong Education Management Information System (EMIS) which should capture all categories of students including refugees, returnees, IDPs and children of host communities. The Djibouti Declaration has emphasized on the need for this and other intervention areas which are outlined thus.

Ramifications of the Djibouti declaration on sustainable development

Sustainable development is possible only through inclusive, equitable and participatory undertaking through comprehensive planning and visionary leadership. It also requires bringing on board a wide-range of actors, stakeholders and partners from near and far. The Djibouti Declaration is not merely about refugee education though this is the cardinal issue to be tackled in a coordinated manner. It is also about education, science, technology and innovation that have to be promoted at both national and regional levels. These are amply captured in the Continental Agenda 2063 of the AU and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN and IGAD’s five-year strategic plan for 2016-2020 as well as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) of the UN adopted in 2016. These are all political commitments at macro levels and will need to be translated into concrete action; and this is not an easy task. The successful implementation of the Djibouti Declaration will result in developing and operationalization of various instruments and guidelines which will ensure children’s and young peoples’ access to quality education, skills and competencies through TVET and higher education programs. It will also result in regional frameworks that will encourage as well as oblige member states to recognize certificates and credentials obtained in other countries within the region. Obviously, this in turn will require establishment or strengthening of quality assurance and equivalency rating mechanisms and agencies which will have to work in line with regional and continental guidelines. Of course, it will be an ambitious goal given the fact that countries will take time to domesticate and implement the declaration and all the required instruments. Some of the activities, especially inclusion of refugees into national education systems will require huge resources. It will also take time to convince partners and mobilize support that responds to the educational needs of refugees. As economic entities manned mostly by pragmatic economists, international financial institutions will have to look into the short,

medium and long-term returns to investment in this sector. In other words, there is a need, on the part of both IGAD and its member states, to develop sound projects, engage in persuasive advocacy and build strong partnership with a wide range of actors and stakeholders.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The IGAD region is one of the regions affected by frequent and protracted conflicts, climate change and the resulting drought and famine as well as other natural and man-made disasters. These socio-political and natural calamities produce millions of forcibly displaced people. Accordingly, the region hosts more than 4.5 million refugees and 8.5 million internally displaced people. Providing access to basic social services, including education for this population category, has been one of the formidable challenges for both refugees and host communities. The refugees cross borders and remain in their host communities for a considerable period of time. Lack of access to quality education and relevant skills means years wasted and opportunities lost. Realizing this fact, international and regional organizations have begun to find comprehensive response strategies to refugees' problems. IGAD, as one of the Regional Economic Communities in the eastern and horn of Africa region, has taken special interest in the multiple challenges facing refugees. The Djibouti declaration and its accompanying plan of action, aims at responding to the educational needs of refugees, returnees and IDPs and host communities. Among others, the declaration urges member states, partners and IFIs to coordinate their efforts in providing access to quality education; develop regional educational quality frameworks; integrate refugee education into national education systems; and adopt mechanism for mutual recognition of education certificates, degrees, diplomas and other credentials obtained in a host countries. The declaration also calls upon IGAD and member states to establish regional platforms and coordination mechanisms in order to follow up progress in the declaration and to implement regional programs in education, science, technology and innovation that are critical for the attainment of globally agreed development instruments such as Agenda 2063 and SDGs. IGAD has taken up these assignments seriously; and is working towards meeting the target in the next three to five years. Regional institutions play important roles in creating political space for their member states to develop commonly agreed commitments. The various normative instruments adopted by member states through the convening power of regional bodies like IGAD will have immense contributions in setting common agenda, creating consensus, developing plans and monitoring progresses. They also bring various stakeholders together to learn from each other and chart the next best way forward based on the lessons learnt. With regard to the subject of

this paper, the Djibouti Declaration on refugees' education, it is essential to consider the following key recommendations:

1. Make refugees a concern for higher education institutions: Higher education institutions, in both the public and private sectors within the region have to give serious attention to the education of refugees, returnees and host communities in the context of their triple responsibilities: teaching, research and community services. If institutions of higher learning are not concerned with the education and social development of forcibly displaced populations, who else will? Despite some sporadic research efforts in cross-border education, which rarely refers to refugees and IDPs, universities do not seem to have a coherent program on tertiary education needs of the refugees. It is imperative that this deficit is addressed through the active involvement of higher education institutions in the provision of quality education for refugees, returnees, IDPs and host communities. As privileged social institutions, some of them running projects funded from taxpayers' money or grants, they should not ignore this important segment of the populations.

2. Strengthen Partnership and Cooperation: Regional institutions, IFIs, and UN Agencies and civil society organizations should join hands in addressing the challenges faced by refugees and refugee-hosting communities in promoting refugees' access to quality education. In the context of the Djibouti declaration, its effective implementation can only be achieved if IGAD and its development partners work in concerted and coordinated manner. To this effect, IGAD needs to undertake vigorous advocacy and partnership building campaigns. It should also support member states in their endeavours to mobilize adequate resources for integration of refugees into their respective national education sector development plan.

3. Establish strong regional coordination and implementation mechanisms: Regional normative instruments require regular follow-up on the status of their implementation. Countries have myriads of competing and often conflicting priorities. Because of this, they may likely fail to meet agreed regional targets unless constantly reminded and assisted technically, financially or otherwise. Therefore, it is essential to put regional coordination, implementation, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place. This will facilitate the flow of information and lessons on subsequent actions in a two-way traffic: from regional secretariats to member states and vice versa.

4. Encourage refugees to pursue education: The reasons for extremely low percentage of refugees' enrolment in tertiary education are linked to a number of internal and external factors. The first refers to the difficult situations

in which refugees find themselves. Having been forcibly displaced from their homes and countries, they experience a series of social, political, economic, psychological and ecological challenges. Their primary concern will, therefore, be survival, adaptation and looking for possibilities of either returning home or migrating to other destinations often to the West or to the Middle East. Higher education or skills training could add value to refugees and their families wherever they live. Therefore, they should be encouraged and supported to seek higher education and skills development opportunities. Further studies should be conducted. In addition to the practical actions towards the implementation of the Djibouti declaration within a broader framework to enhance quality, affordable and accessible education in the region, higher education institutions are encouraged to conduct studies on the linkage between access to education by refugees, returnees and host communities and sustainable development. This can be done through collaborative projects and multi-stakeholder partnerships between public and private higher education institutions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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