

**POLICY BRIEF** DECEMBER 2019



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**YOUTH VOICES ON DURABLE SOLUTIONS TO FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN AFRICA**



THE YEAR OF REFUGEES,  
RETURNEES AND INTERNALLY  
DISPLACED PERSONS:  
Towards Durable Solutions to  
Forced Displacement in Africa.

**#DGTrends**

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# Introduction

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The African Union Heads of State and Government at their 31st Ordinary Session held in Nouakchott, Mauritania in July 2018 adopted a decision declaring 2019 as

**“The year of Refugees, Returnees and IDPs: towards durable solutions to forced displacement in Africa”.**

The AU’s decision to spotlight the challenges faced by forcibly displaced persons on the Continent was informed by concerns about the scale and complexities of forced displacement and protracted humanitarian situations that continue to ravage countries and communities across the Continent. The main causes of such situations as identified by the Heads of State and Government at the launch of the theme in February 2019 include civil strife and violent conflicts, human rights violations, persecution, governance deficits, impunity, natural disasters and calamities, effects of drought and climate change, terrorism and violent extremism.<sup>1</sup>

Going by the most recent numbers, there is reason for concern. According to the 2019 Africa Report on Internal Displacement by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), there were 16.8 million people living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence on the Continent by end of 2018. This is the highest figure ever recorded for Africa and around 40 % of the global total. Disasters from floods, storms, drought and other climate-related hazards displaced an additional 2.6 million during the year.<sup>2</sup> Other sources with recent figures provide that on average, 1.6 Million Africans have been forcibly

displaced since 2014 and that there were a record 25 million African refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and asylum seekers documented in 2018.<sup>3</sup> Further, over 95% of forcibly displaced Africans remain in the Continent while two thirds of this number remain within their own countries.<sup>4</sup>

It has been observed that little data exists within humanitarian organisations on displaced youth. Most humanitarian organisations do not collect statistics on a ‘youth’ age group and so there is a lack of accurate data on the numbers of displaced young people<sup>5</sup>. It has however been observed that the ‘youth bulge’ in countries of origin, particularly in the Middle East and Africa, suggests that this age group forms a large proportion of the refugee population.<sup>6</sup> Institutions such as the African Union are increasingly acknowledging the importance of youth engagement through increasing their capacity and agency to participate in decision-making processes over programmes and policies that affect their lives.

It is on this premise that the Continental Youth Consultation was organised from 2-3 December 2019 in Kampala, Uganda under the theme:

**Youth and Forced Displacement in Africa: Trends, Challenges and Prospects Towards Durable Solutions.**

The Consultation provided a platform for engagement, interaction and experience sharing

among various stakeholders, including youth, on the impact of forced displacement on youth, focusing on trends, challenges and prospects towards durable solutions.

This policy brief will provide a summary of the deliberations and key messages from the youth and youth organisations present at the above-mentioned Continental Youth Consul-

tation. It aggregates the voices of delegates present regarding experiences and challenges of displaced youth, their efforts to reclaim their voices and agency, their views on drivers of forced displacement on the Continent and their proposals on durable solutions.

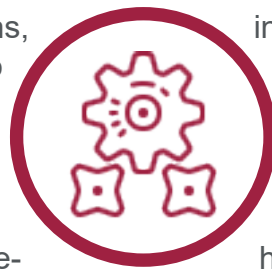
The irony of the disturbingly huge numbers of displaced persons as mentioned above is the

## AU Legal Frameworks on Forced Displacement

existence of an array of AU Conventions, Declarations and Resolutions meant to ensure prevention of displacement, protection during displacement and provision of assistance to the displaced. These instruments include the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Refugee Convention), African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted in 1981, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child adopted in 1990, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa adopted in 2003, the African Youth Charter adopted in 2006, African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance adopted in 2007.

Key decisions, declarations and policies include the Ouagadougou Declaration on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons 2006, Khartoum Declaration on Africa's Refugee Crisis, the Kigali Declaration of the First AU Ministerial Conference on Human Rights in Africa, the AU Policy on Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development and importantly, the Common African Position on Humanitarian Effectiveness.

Delegates and experts at the Continental Youth Consultation observed the problematic



incidence of increased adoption of normative and institutional frameworks that has corresponded with increased numbers of refugees and IDPs in Africa. This leads to the question of whether the norms and institutions have really helped to improve the displacement challenge.

In response to this, experts at the Dialogue explained that instruments such as the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention were largely created to manage and not prevent displacement.

A glaring gap highlighted at the Consultation was that existing normative and institutional frameworks provide blanket protection for youth and therefore refugee youth are not considered distinctly but as part of a larger group when identifying durable solutions.

Further, the resettlement criteria continue to look at women and children as different groups but do not distinguish the youth as an independent group with specific needs.

This was flagged as a policy gap in the quest to secure protection for the young displaced persons that requires redress by all humanitarian actors, including Member States.

While displacement poses difficulties for all persons affected including uncertainty about

# Consequences of Displacement Specific to the Youth

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the future, it has been observed that displaced youth are affected in particular ways. They have been described as living in a state of limbo – they often lack access to quality education and have limited access to adequate, safe and dignified employment opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

For the displaced youth, protracted displacement means inability to map out a future for themselves. They are often politically marginalised and socially excluded and this is exemplified by exclusion from decision-making by elders, international agencies and local authorities.

Such exclusion is primarily informed by lack of respect and acknowledgement that the youth are a distinct group with rights.<sup>8</sup>

Displaced youth on the Continent (and across the world) continue to face numerous challenges and these are increasingly being voiced by the youth. The now well documented challenges require deliberate and genuine efforts and leadership to address.

The UNHCR and the Women's Refugee Commission organised the Global Refugee Youth Consultations in 2015-2016 in a total of 22 countries.<sup>9</sup>

These consultations brought to the fore 10 key challenges faced by refugee youth across the different countries. These resonate with the challenges highlighted during the Continental Youth Consultations organised by the AU in December 2019 and are therefore worth re-emphasising.

Young people experience various challenge on different levels listed as follows:

- (1) difficulty with legal recognition and obtaining personal documents;
- (2) difficulty in accessing quality learning, education, and skill-building opportunities;
- (3) discrimination, racism and xenophobia;
- (4) few youth employment and livelihood opportunities;
- (5) gender inequality, discrimination, exploitation and violence;
- (6) poor access to youth sensitive health care, including psychosocial support;
- (7) lack of safety, security and freedom of movement – including police harassment;
- (8) lack of opportunities to participate, be engaged, or access decision makers;
- (9) lack of information about asylum, refugee rights and available services; and
- (10) challenges for unaccompanied youth, including higher risks of exploitation and violence.<sup>10</sup>



Delegates at the Global Refugee Youth Consultations noted that in situations of forced displacement, the youth are seldom consulted, frequently overlooked, and often unable to fully participate in decision making.<sup>11</sup>

The talents, energy, and potential of refugee youth remain largely untapped and this must change. Importantly, refugee youth want the same things young people everywhere want: to be consulted, to be listened to, to contribute, to engage, and to be part of solutions. They want opportunities, education, employment, and Inclusion.<sup>12</sup>



The Continental Youth Consultation highlighted that young women and girls in some camps within AU Member States are engaging in survival sex as their needs make accepting demands for sex the only option for their own survival and that of their families. From the discussions, it was strongly urged that those who push displaced victims to such lengths, including persons in authority within camps, should be held to account just as those who forcibly perpetrate sexual violence. The youth delegates in Kampala further noted the increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation partic-

ularly for young women in humanitarian situations. They advocated for the dismantling of prohibitive legal procedures and evidence thresholds which discourage displaced victims of sexual and gender-based violence to seek justice. They further decried the fact that legal redress continues to be hampered by societal stigma which discourages victims from speaking out and this results in perpetrators continuing to avoid punishment even after going through judicial processes.

Various explanations for forced displacement on the Continent have been advanced and one

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## Drivers of Displacement in Africa

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given categorisation of these reasons is 'near-term and structural factors'.<sup>13</sup> Near-term drivers of displacement in Africa have been outlined as including :

- (1) unresolved conflicts that perpetuate displacement;
- (2) repressive governance; and
- (3) economic factors.

As regards to conflict, it is observed that currently there are 13 African countries facing major armed conflict and their citizens account for 90% of all displaced persons on the Continent. There is an obvious prediction that the crises of displaced persons will continue as long as conflicts in these countries persist<sup>14</sup>.

Repressive governance is a contributor of displacement as how governments respond to citizens' priorities and grievances has been said to be at the heart of forced displacement. Restrictive political environments have been found to be direct drivers of forced displacement and indirect drivers of displacement through the resulting conflict.<sup>15</sup>

Economic factors are another driver of forced displacement particularly in situations where many young Africans leave home countries because they do not see a viable future for themselves at home.<sup>16</sup>

Identified structural factors that drive forced displacement include growing populations on the Continent where it has been pointed out that rapid population growths being witness in African States will increase challenges faced by citizens in accessing basic needs and therefore likely to push people, and the youth in particular, to seek livelihoods elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Environmental pressures such as floods, landslides and other forms of extreme weather also constitute structural factors accelerating displacement.<sup>18</sup>

Identified drivers of displacement at the Continental Youth Consultation in Kampala largely mirrored the above factors. There was consensus from youth delegates that the major root causes of forced displacement on the

Continent include protracted violence, climate change and natural disasters, xenophobia, terrorism and violent extremism, governance deficits including human rights abuses and election-related violence, inequality, poverty, marginalization, socio-economic and political exclusion and ethnic tensions. Importantly, delegates concluded that the starting point in efforts to tackle these factors and which double

up as the root causes of forced displacement was to get political leadership right, and this of necessity includes having young people in decision-making spaces.

## Problematizing Durable Solutions and Contributions of the Youth

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Durable solutions frameworks on forced displacement have championed three settlement options, namely, sustainable voluntary return, sustainable settlement elsewhere and sustainable local integration. However, these are now being challenged for their over reliance on and assumptions of finite conditions of place, event, state and status as well as their preoccupation with ending mobility and movement while in reality post-crisis situations are more fluid.<sup>19</sup> These assumptions of finite conditions are explained briefly below.

Firstly, it has been argued that the presumption of a finite location is problematic because there is rarely a predicable path from displacement to a finite physical end point like returning to an original or fixed abode.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, there is no finite event that paves way for one comprehensive resolution to displacement. For example, the concept of return remains fluid as it has many phases and is also dependent on individual and household decisions.

Thirdly, it is suggested that there is no finite state because protection and assistance needs following displacement continue even after physical movement, will vary from place

to place, community to community and through time.<sup>21</sup>

Lastly, the idea of a finite status is equally inaccurate because existing durable solutions frameworks focus on refugees and IDPs primarily. However, other mobile populations are also impacted by displacement and crises and these do not receive the required attention or access to protection and assistance. For example, those unable to move or host populations also have rights and concerns that must be recognised and addressed.<sup>22</sup>

There are suggestions that Member States and other actors in humanitarian interventions ought to now move the conversation beyond durable solutions to holistic approaches to eradicating causes of displacement on the Continent.<sup>23</sup> This latter approach, it has been proposed, will take the form of :

- (1) addressing root causes of conflict on the Continent that include separatist tensions and terrorism;
- (2) controlling the proliferation of small arms that have exacerbated armed conflict and occasioned massive displacement;
- (3) enhancing the respect for human rights and humanitarian law in Africa;

(4) building resilience and capacity of countries to adapt, prevent and respond to crises and disasters;

(5) universal ratification and full implementation of relevant AU norms on prevention of displacement and assistance and protection of those forcibly displaced.<sup>24</sup>

These holistic approaches were echoed during the Continental Youth Consultation. Speakers challenged the youth to increase their interest and participation in promotion of peace and non-violent resolution of conflict.

This would be in line with article 17 of the African Youth Charter that recognises the important role of youth in promoting peace and non-violence. In this regard, experts and plenary contributions at the Consultation reiterated the important role of Member States in building the capacity of young people and youth organisations in peace building, conflict

prevention and conflict resolution as mandated by the African Youth Charter. Additionally, as regards displaced victims of sexual violence, many of whom are youth, contributors urged that perpetrators should not enjoy impunity. Importantly, humanitarian stakeholders were implored upon to creatively think of effective reparations for victims of sexual violence now even as transitional justice processes continue.

In summary, the youth delegates in Kampala expressed frustration at the fact that AU Member States continued to be preoccupied with addressing the symptoms, namely, displaced persons and their living conditions and not delving into root causes of displacement. As a long-term solution, they called for a shift from focusing only on palliative solutions to include preventative solutions to crises of forcibly displaced persons.

## Displaced Youth have Agency

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The Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) states that the empowerment of refugee and host community youth, building on their talent, potential and energy, supports resilience and eventual solutions.<sup>25</sup>

The GCR highlights that ‘the active participation and engagement of refugee and host community youth will be supported by States and relevant stakeholders, including through projects that recognize, utilize and develop their capacities and skills, and foster their physical and emotional well-being.’<sup>26</sup> The challenge is to now actualise this commitment as the reality for displaced youth in Africa remains far from this stated ideal.

Stereotypes and negative perceptions of refugees and youth have been noted to abound. On the one hand, refugees are viewed as ‘troublemakers, diseased, terrorists, hit men,

thieves, narcotics traffickers, prostitutes, and opportunists who are taking jobs and services away from locals’. On the other hand, the youth are perceived as ‘lazy, delinquent, disrespectful, criminal, substance abusers, irresponsible, unable to be involved in decision making, inexperienced, and ignorant’.<sup>27</sup>

The above perceptions are however far from the truth as displaced youth continue to demonstrate that given opportunities, they can not only engage in self-help activities but can contribute significantly to the broader communities they live in. In the case of Uganda, this demonstration of agency by refugees has been formalised through a self-reliance strategy agreed on between UNHCR and the Government of Uganda.<sup>28</sup> Self-reliance for refugees in the context of this strategy entails:

- a) ability to grow their own food;
- b) access to and ability to pay for the cost of the health and educational services provided to refugees by themselves (at the same level as the nationals);
- c) ability to take part in socio-economic activities, particularly income generation activities;
- d) ability to maintain self-sustaining community structures by providing opportunities for better organising and responding to issues concerning them by themselves.

In one study on various innovations by refugees in Africa, interesting initiatives by young people have been documented across the Continent. For example, in Uganda's Nakivale settlement, a young refugee has established the first computer games shop while another one in the same settlement has set up a milling

plant to grind maize into flour.<sup>29</sup>

In Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp, refugee youth have set up Wi-Fi cyber cafés and in the process solved a major need for access to internet within the camp.<sup>30</sup>

Another example from Uganda is that of YAR-ID, a youth organisation run by refugee volunteers, helping refugees in Kampala overcome some of their barriers by providing English classes, social media training, business skills, internet access and women's craft training.<sup>31</sup>

It can be seen from these examples that when given opportunity and necessary facilitation, refugee youth can self-organise, support each other and importantly, provide vital community services.

## Conclusion

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This policy brief has shown that despite an impressive record of adopting continental norms on forced displacement and its causes, the irony is that more laws have corresponded with increased numbers of refugees and IDPs in Africa as there is preoccupation with managing humanitarian crises as opposed to preventing them in the first place. While displacement hits everyone hard, it has been shown that the youth suffer specific vulnerabilities as they often lack access to quality education, have limited access to adequate, safe and dignified employment opportunities.

Unresolved conflicts, repressive governance that is defined by restrictive political environments and economic hardships were highlighted as some of the major root causes of displacement. According to the youth delegates in Kampala, the point of departure in tackling these factors is getting political leadership

right, which of necessity includes having inclusive and diverse leadership that includes young people in decision-making spaces. The brief has further highlighted that according to the youth, realising durable solutions is contingent on youth participation in promotion of peace and non-violent resolution of conflict as envisaged in the African Youth Charter.

Importantly, displaced youth have demonstrated that contrary to the negative stereotypes perpetuated about them, they have agency and can self-organise, be innovative and provide vital community services and solutions. All said, young people on the Continent urgently want the AU and Member States to shift from their preoccupation with addressing the symptom that is forced displacement and genuinely provide leadership in addressing root causes of displacement.



# Key Recommendations from the Kampala Continental Youth Consultation

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1.To stem the rising numbers of irregular migrants, participants recommended that States invest more and encourage growth of the informal sector. However, it was critical to ensure that this sector is not defined by meagre returns and low wages. This was possible through appropriate policies and skills improvement for the young people venturing into the sector.

2.Member States were urged to ensure young refugees are viewed as persons with skills and innovative ideas that are beneficial to their host communities. Such skills should be harnessed to enable displaced young persons to make contributions to socio-economic growth. This however should begin with States not treating young refugees and the youth generally as a homogenous group but rather appreciate their intersectionality and provide enabling conditions accordingly.

3.Member States must get political leadership and governance right to avoid making irregular migration inevitable. Further, the AU should organise consultations and dialogues that are dedicated to exploring preventative solutions to factors that fuel displacement and drive young people on the Continent to migrate irregularly.

4.Undemocratic elections that suppress the free will of the people at the ballot is a frequent instigator of violence and civil unrest that subsequently leads to forced displacement, with the youth being the most affected. The AU should hold Member States accountable as regards fa-

cilitating free and fair elections, in accordance with the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, as part of the durable solutions to forced displacement.

5.Member States and humanitarian actors should ensure analyses of the differentiated impact of forced displacement on young women and girls and adopt robust strategies to curb the incidences of gender-based violence, sexual harassment and violation of human rights of displaced women and girls. They must also ensure safe spaces and psycho-social support for displaced victims of gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

6.Member States and humanitarian agencies should develop and enhance the skills, capacities and qualifications of displaced young people. This includes ensuring access to quality and inclusive learning opportunities including formal and non-formal education, skills building, jobs training and facilitate employment and livelihood opportunities.

7.Given that young people are key actors in violent conflicts that are major triggers of forced displacement across the Continent, Member States should build the capacity of young people and youth organisations in peace building, conflict prevention and conflict resolution as mandated by the African Youth Charter.

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# End Notes

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