

The Perception of Congolese Refugees in Burundi of the Recommended Durable Solutions for Them

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Abstract

Burundi started to receive refugees during the colonial period in 1959. These were Rwandan refugees who were fleeing massacres in their country. Since then, the reception of refugees has never stopped and Burundi currently has 84,961 refugees, most of whom come from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is a very large number of people, considering the size of Burundi and its population. These refugees come from the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo and are fleeing the insecurity caused by the armed groups that are multiplying there. This work is the result of field visits to the five refugee camps in Burundi, which resulted in a total of 90 interviews. The sample included both men and women, taking into account their social status, vulnerability, and seniority (former and new refugees). To collect the data, we used a voice recorder and a notebook at our disposal in which we put some details that needed clarification. We used Word, Excel, and SPSS to process the data. The analysis of these interviews shows the difficulties of the life of these refugees. The objective of this study is to analyze refugees' perception of durable solutions to their problem of exile. As these refugees do not expect to return home, most of them turn to resettlement. Only 37.8% have been selected for resettlement. Naturalization and repatriation, two other durable solutions, are not part of the choice of these refugees who are looking toward resettlement.

Keywords: Refugees, durable solutions, resettlement, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo

1. Introduction

Since the independence years, political struggles for control of power have forced people to move around the Great Lakes region. This migratory movement has increased since the early 1990s, during which serious national political crises gave rise to the active mobilization of expatriate nationals, which led to an increase in

the number of new refugees: the years 1994-1996 transformed the region into one of the major poles of international humanitarian intervention for various categories of displaced and refugee populations, due to the concomitant conflicts [1], [2].

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Zaire at the time, large waves of migration began in 1996-97. These waves continue today in the provinces of North and South Kivu, following repeated clashes between rebel groups and the regular army.

Currently, the majority of refugees in Burundi come from the DRC, mainly from the east. Indeed, several armed groups, including the Mai Mai and others, are multiplying in eastern Congo [3], [4]. There are about 120 armed groups in North and South Kivu alone, most of them small and mainly ethnocentric. More and more of them, however, are entangled in an unstable network of coalitions, sometimes including broader political and commercial networks [5].

This refugee issue, to this day, has yet to be resolved. For example, as of March 31, 2022, refugees and asylum seekers from the DRC numbered 1,018,761: 45.1% of them, or 459,073, are in Uganda; 8.3% of them, or 84,961, are in Burundi; 7.8% of them, or 79,839, are in the United Republic of Tanzania; and 7.6%, or 77,116, are in Rwanda [6]. The rest of the refugees and asylum seekers from the DRC are in 16 other different countries that are Zambia, South Africa, Angola, Malawi, Congo, Kenya, South Soudan, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, Central Africa republic, Eswatini, Lesotho, Botswana, Chad, and Madagascar [7].

Faced with such a situation, the UNHCR advocates for durable solutions. Indeed, according to the UNHCR Executive Committee, the ultimate goal of international protection is to implement durable solutions for refugees [8]. The UNHCR Resettlement Handbook adds that there is no established hierarchy among these durable solutions. In the early years of UNHCR's existence, resettlement and local integration seemed to be the most viable durable solutions for many refugees. Over time, however, most refugees have sought and obtained voluntary repatriation. These three solutions are complementary and can when applied together, form a comprehensive and viable strategy to resolve a refugee situation [9].

The Burundian law on migration stipulates in its article 127 that the UNHCR shall assist refugees in finding durable solutions for their situations, in particular by organizing voluntary repatriation operations, resettling them in a third country, and facilitating local integration procedures [10, Art. 127]. Surprisingly, the Burundian legislator reserves this for the UNHCR. The UNHCR statute stipulates in its point 8 litera C that the High Commissioner shall ensure the protection of refugees who are under the responsibility of the UNHCR by supporting the initiatives of the public authorities and private initiatives concerning the voluntary repatriation of refugees or their assimilation into new national communities. Here, it is very clear that it is the states that must take the lead. UNHCR is only a secondary actor.

2. Materials and Methods

The instrument used for data collection was the interview guide, consisting of open-ended questions addressed to refugees living in refugee camps. Our survey population consisted of 90 refugees. The sample includes men and women, taking into account their social status (intellectuals, teachers, pastors, neighborhood leaders in the camp, animators), vulnerability (people living with disabilities, single women (men) heads of households), and seniority (old and new refugees). The method used was qualitative. The selection of interviewees varied from camp to camp. The camp administrator put us in touch with a guide who knew the camp and could help us take all these criteria into account. The research was conducted primarily through semi-structured interviews [11]. The research questions guiding this study were popularized to ask the refugees questions according to the following themes: reception conditions, daily life (food, health, schooling, exit permits, travel documents), as well as durable solutions (possibility of a return to the country of origin, naturalization, resettlement).

The themes were identified as elements that could explain the journey of these refugees from their arrival in Burundi to the camp, as well as the level of their protection in the camp.

The semi-structured interview format was used to explore how the refugees expressed themselves on these issues and explained their perception of the current situation and their future.

In general, the interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of trust and good cooperation. However, at the level of the National Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons, some interviewees refused to register. This forced us to resort to listening and direct transcription.

Finally, to use the language best understood by the interviewee, the interviews were conducted in either Kiswahili, Kirundi, or French, depending on the preference of the interviewee. All interviews conducted in languages other than English were transcribed into English.

To collect the data, we used a voice recorder (dictaphone and telephone), so that we could use the recordings later. We also had at our disposal a notebook in which we put certain details requiring clarification. Afterward, we proceeded with the transcription. For data processing, we used Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and SPSS. We used Zotero tool referencing throughout this research.

3. Results of the study

For resettlement, out of 90 refugees interviewed, 56, or 62.2% have not yet been selected for resettlement. Only 34 refugees or 37.8% of our interviewees have been selected for resettlement. A general observation from the interviews conducted is that all refugees put their hope in resettlement to El Dorado. For naturalization, all the refugees interviewed (100%) do not want it. Naturalization is not a preferred solution for these refugees, all of whom only want resettlement. As for repatriation, since most of the Congolese refugees in Burundi come from eastern DRC and there

are currently an increasing number of armed groups there, voluntary repatriation is not a solution that they would consider. 100% of the refugees interviewed said they were not in favor of repatriation.

Congolese refugees in Burundi's perception of the durable solutions recommended for them

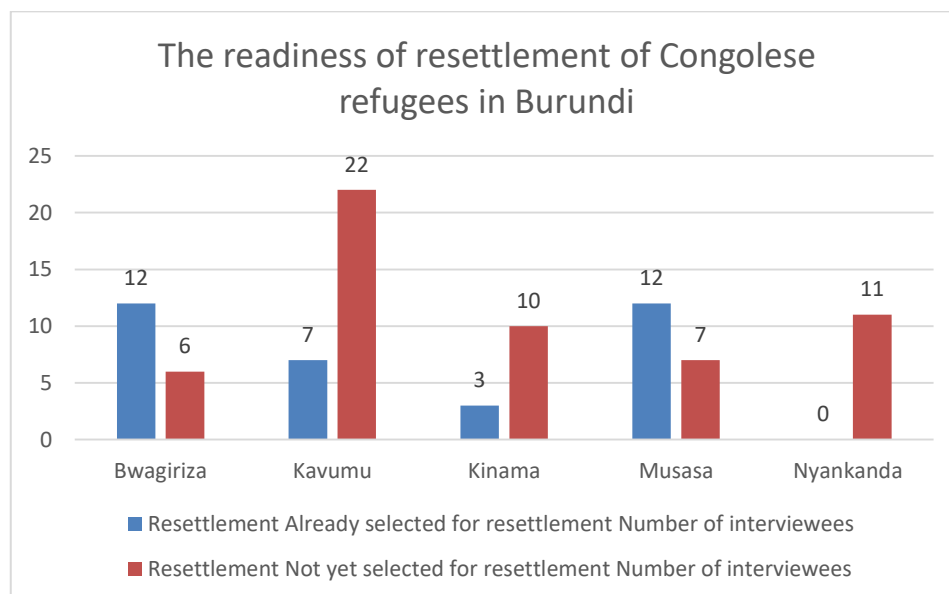
The durable solutions recommended by the UNHCR are resettlement, naturalization, and repatriation.

Resettlement is the transfer of refugees from one country, where they have found asylum, to another state that agrees to admit them as refugees and grant them permanent resettlement and the possibility of acquiring citizenship at a later date. Resettlement is the third durable solution that UNHCR is mandated to implement, in cooperation with States, under its Statute and the resolutions of the UN General Assembly.

Generally speaking, we realized through the interviews we conducted that the possibility of resettlement is highly anticipated by almost all refugees. It maintains a form of expectation and hope.

A general observation from the interviews conducted is that all refugees put their hope in resettlement to El Dorado.

Table 1. Number of respondents chosen or not chosen for resettlement by camp



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4. Discussions

For naturalization, the Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees stipulates in Article 34 that the Contracting States shall facilitate, as far as possible, the assimilation and naturalization of refugees. They shall endeavor, in particular, to accelerate the naturalization procedure and to reduce the fees and costs of this procedure. The Burundian law of 2021 on migration specifies on this point that a refugee who applies for naturalization in Burundi must comply with the relevant legislation[10, Art. 63].

The observation made in the field is that naturalization is not a preferred solution for refugees, all of whom only want to be resettled. All the refugees interviewed (100%) do not want resettlement.

As for repatriation, the UNHCR Executive Committee states that refugees should only be repatriated if they freely express the desire to do so; the voluntary and individual nature of the repatriation of refugees and the need to carry out this repatriation in conditions of absolute safety, preferably at the refugees' place of residence in the country of origin, should always be respected[12]. However, since most Congolese refugees in Burundi come mainly from eastern DRC and there are currently an increasing number of armed groups there, voluntary repatriation is not a solution that they are considering. 100% of the refugees interviewed said they were not in favor of repatriation.

The results confirm the refugees' choice of resettlement "to countries considered to be developed," which they perceive as the only hope for their future.

5. Conclusion

Burundi is facing a growing number of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo. As the ultimate goal of international protection is to implement durable solutions for refugees[8], our research focused on the perception of Congolese refugees in Burundi of the durable solutions recommended for them. The results of the interviews conducted in the different camps (90 interviews) show that all refugees chose resettlement "in countries considered to be developed" as the only hope for their future.

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