



Sustainably Supporting Refugees in Ghana

The purpose of this article is to inform the general public about measures in place for providing sustained support to refugees and asylum seekers in Ghana. This endeavor has become necessary in the light of recent unfortunate episode of Sudanese refugees encamping outside the premises of the UNHCR-Ghana office over a period of time to air their concerns leading to their removal by the Police; the associated misleading information on the degree of support provided to refugees and asylum seekers in the country.

Without mincing words, becoming a refugee is not by choice. It is a difficult decision to make, and for many refugees, the choice is between the horrific or something worse. It is therefore important that refugees are offered the necessary support to be able to get back on their feet and start life afresh, as is most often the case.

Brief Institutional background of Refugee Management in Ghana

The Ghana Refugee Board (GRB) was established by PNDC LAW 305 (D) of 1992 with a broad mandate to provide care and protection for all asylum seekers and refugees on the shores of Ghana. GRB is an autonomous agency under the Ministry of the Interior. The Board is chaired by an official who has been appointed by the President of Ghana, and composed of representatives from the Ghana Police, Immigration, National Security, Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Gender and Social Welfare, Attorney General and Justice and the National Disaster Management Organization with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency having an observer status. All Board functions are performed within the following legal confines of the Ghana Refugee Law of 1992; the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees; and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. The core activities of the GRB include the following: Refugee Policy formulation; Refugee Status Determination; Counseling; Verification Exercises; Camp Management; Documentation; Local Integration; Naturalization; Advocacy and Oversight. GRB's day-to-day affairs are handled by a Secretariat under an Executive Secretary appointed by the President on the advice of the Public Service Commission. For further information about the Ghana Refugee Board, please refer to <http://www.grb.gov.gh/index>

UNHCR's role is to provide technical and operational support to enable the Government of Ghana to meet its Conventional obligations towards refugees. UNHCR Ghana has an Office in Accra and a full presence in the Takoradi sub-office where it monitors the situation in the refugee camps alongside GRB. You could learn more about UNHCR Ghana here: <http://www.unhcr-ghana.org/>

UNHCR and the Ghana Refugee Board work with Implementing and Operational Partners who deliver assistance and support to refugees in the camps. This ranges from facilitating access to health, education, accommodation, water and sanitation among other support. Implementing Partners currently working with the UNHCR includes the National Catholic Secretariat (NCS), the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG)

Genesis of the Refugee Phenomenon

As an “oasis of peace” in the West African sub-region which recently experienced a series of political turbulence, Ghana has been and remains the preferred choice of destination for people displaced by internal conflicts and civil unrests in the sub-region and beyond. Persons seeking asylum in Ghana are assured of protection by the state and its agencies under the International Refugee Convention and affiliated mandates. The country has therefore experienced influxes from at least three countries in the sub-region as a result of generalized violence. In the 1990s, over 50,000 Liberians sought refuge in Ghana during the Liberian civil war. More recently, Ghana received over 20,000 Ivorians fueled by the Ivorian political crisis of 2011. Togolese and Sierra Leoneans have also benefitted from *prima facie* refugee status in Ghana throughout the years. There are presently three (3) camps which hosts refugees from Cote d'Ivoire: Ampain Camp in the Western Region, Egyekrom Camp in the Central Region and Fetentaa Camp in the Brong-Ahafo Region and one (1) mixed population camp at Krisan in the Western Region.

Currently, the country hosts refugees from about 38 different countries across the world with the total number of refugees and asylum seekers registered numbering approximately thirteen thousand, three hundred (13,300).

Operational Policy Framework

A distinctive feature of the operational policy framework is that privileges available to all citizens in terms of a supportive enabling environment and access to essential services are extended to all asylum seekers and refugees in the country. Refugees have a choice of residential location (where to live), free movement, permit for employment and establishing means of livelihood, assistance to open bank accounts and possess travel documents.

Ghana ensures that all asylum seekers and refugees have access to services by integrating and mainstreaming the provisions and delivery of such services into the national service systems. At the camp level, refugees have been given plots of land and related assistance to undertake farming activities involving planting of maize, cassava, and vegetables. Some are engaged in agro-processing of coconut and palm oil; poultry and mushroom production, fishing, soap and charcoal production. Entrepreneurship training is provided to engage in apprenticeship and

vocational certification programs. The vulnerable are given cash grants to engage in petty trading. Services in the camps are integrated into the national and municipal service delivery systems. Security is provided by the Ghana Police Service. Utilities including water, electricity, sanitation services are provided by the municipal and district service providers. Camp schools are integrated into the national education service, and children are enrolled in the school feeding program financed by the government. Clinics on refugee camps are managed by officials of the Ghana Health Services and permission granted to enroll in the National Health Insurance Scheme to have access to primary health care.

Certainly, this policy and operational framework is progressive and in line with the recent Compact on Refugees passed by the UN General Assembly recently. It is precisely the fact that there will never be enough resources to meet every need and the imperative of empowering refugees to be self-sufficient that informed the new Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, (CRRF). This is to ensure, in line with Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 that refugees are not left behind but are part and parcel of the national and local development plans. UNHCR works closely with the UN Country Team to deliver as one in this regard.

At the end of the day, it is about the search for durable solutions to end the refugee plight. This ranges from voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity back to the country of origin when it is feasible to do so, local integration in the country of asylum, and resettlement to a third country for those cases that qualify which are usual not more than 1% of the refugee population globally. This is informed by the situation in the country of origin, the country of asylum and the country of resettlement. UNHCR's role is to support Countries which are State parties to refugee conventions to implement solutions when it is feasible. And in the interim, it is about enhancing the quality of protection during their period of asylum within available resources.

The Sudanese refugees who camped outside the UNHCR Office:

On Thursday January 10, 2019, a group of Sudanese refugees who had pitched camp at the entrance of the UNHCR offices in Accra had to be removed by officials of the Ghana Police Service and taken back to the Kisan refugee camp in the Western Region. The refugees who were only a fraction of Sudanese refugees in Ghana had been picketing at the premises since November 27, 2018. It is important to note that this particular group of refugees arrived in Ghana in 2004. The majority from this group live in the Kisan Camp in the Western Region. However, given that refugees in Ghana have freedom of movement and the right to work, some prefer to settle in urban areas, including Accra, in search of livelihood opportunities.

The Sudanese refugees submitted a petition which included some of their concerns relating to health, education, shelter, livelihoods and resettlement. UNHCR Ghana received the petition and responded in detail to each individual issue in extensive counselling sessions. Additionally, UNHCR and the Ghana Refugee Board officials met with both the leadership as well as the whole group in several lengthy meetings where their concerns were discussed at length. Despite long and painstaking interviews with the individuals in the group, and the comprehensive responses to each of their issues, the refugees adamantly refused to go back to Kisan or leave the entrance of the UNHCR office in Accra to return to their regular places of abode, where they would receive

further support and counselling. The office had been particularly concerned about the children and pregnant mothers amongst them and the insanitary conditions while outside the UNHCR offices, as well as the risk of accidents with the children playing along the road.

The specific concerns in practical terms

Health - all refugees in Ghana have access to the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), for which they are provided with funding to partially cover the NHIS. Some medications and medical procedures may not be covered by the insurance – as is the case for all Ghanaians using the national health insurance. In such instances, support can be sought from UNHCR Health partners on an individual basis where necessary. In exceptional instances depending on the magnitude of the problem, UNHCR and GRB can provide support within its limited resources.

Education – refugees are fully integrated into the Ghana education system; education is accessible to all refugees. Most school/registration fees are covered by the national education system as follows:

Basic Education (from Kindergarten to Junior Secondary) is free. Refugees who live in camp or urban areas are provided with exercise books and uniform, while the cost of school exams is covered by UNHCR.

Secondary Education (senior high school) is also free and accessible to refugees, with additional support available to refugee students.

Tertiary education is open to refugee students, however, support is only available through a limited number of DAFI scholarship (an Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) developed to enable refugee students' access to higher education in their country of asylum and contribute to the process of reintegration in the home country upon repatriation. Many are eligible but do not have the means to pay for fees and subsistence.

Accommodation – approximately 50% of all refugees in Ghana currently live in one of the four camps (Ampain, Egyeikrom, Fetentaa or Krisan) where accommodation support is provided. Save for vulnerable or needy cases, refugees who opt to reside in urban centers have to cater for their accommodation.

Food assistance – food assistance for Sudanese refugees has been phased out in 2009. While food support can be provided to extremely vulnerable household, capacity and funding does not permit food assistance for an extended length of time and it will not be possible to reactivate food assistance. UNHCR and its partners work together to provide some socio-economic support for those most affected by the discontinuation of food or similar assistance, and to support the development livelihood/self-reliance opportunities for refugees.

UNHCR in collaboration with the Ghana Refugee Board, other relevant arms of government and other partners will continue to work together to protect and assist all refugees in Ghana including fundraising and outreach to other non-traditional partners including the private sector and business community to augment available support.

Gaps in Assistance to refugees in Ghana

Amidst such notable strides however remain the strains of hosting refugees who are mainly in protracted situations in the country with some key challenges highlighted as follows:

Education support is up to the secondary level. The only available support in terms of tertiary education currently is the DAFI scholarship which is very competitive and has limited slots. It therefore becomes a challenge for students who reach the tertiary level as support is very limited due to the funding challenges. Given that the youth are majority of the refugees, addressing this challenge effectively will significantly obviate idleness among them.

Livelihoods and employment: UNHCR and partners have initiated several livelihood activities in the camps in an effort to support refugees to become self-reliant. These activities include agriculture, agro-processing, apprenticeship, cash grants for small business start-ups and the like. However, more support is needed in the area of funding for business cash grants, marketing opportunities for refugee produce and skills training to mention a few.

Unemployment rates in Ghana are quite high and refugees face similar if not stiffer challenges as the Ghanaians in finding employment. Hence the emphasis on self-employments and the informal sector.

GRB, UNHCR and its partners, both Implementing and Operational, have been engaged in seeking further support and fundraising to close the existing gaps aforementioned and will continue to reach out to both traditional and non-traditional partners for support until durable solutions are identified for all refugees in Ghana. One refugee without a durable solution is one too many.

Finally, as we thank the people and Government of Ghana for its Pan-Africanist progressive support to refugees, we also thank the Donors for their continual support and goodwill towards refugees.

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