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Reflections on My Transition from Refugee to an Immigrant and Scholar**

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**Forced Migration and Global Citizenship:
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By Ahmed Khan

This paper is a reflection on my journey from Sierra Leone as a refugee to being a Canadian immigrant and scholar. This transition provided me with the impetus to reflect on my growing identity as a global citizen, connected not only to Sierra Leonean and Canadian ideals, but also actively involved in broader international issues and scholarly research. Indeed, what makes this reflection on my journey interesting are the concurrent global events related to forced migration; ranging from natural disasters to civil upheavals and conflicts. Some examples include the uprisings across the Arab world, devastating earthquakes in Haiti and Australia and the Southeast Asia tsunami. These events highlight an imperative to achieve a better understanding of the role of global citizenship in curbing forced migration and promoting human welfare and peace.

Global citizenship can be defined broadly to mean individual and collective contributions relating to local and international issues; irrespective of jurisdiction, race, gender or income. According to Brecher *et al.* (1993), global citizens have a unique perspective, one that is built on shared understanding, based on democratic principles, and contributing to better and peaceful nations. The myriad linkages between migration and citizenship have received a lot of attention in recent years, especially with the rise of political conflicts, social unrest due to food crises, poor governance, and natural disasters (Jefferess 2008; Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky 2006). In 2010, an estimated 44 million forcibly displaced people were reported, the highest number in the past fifteen years (UNHCR 2011). This figure includes refugees, internally displaced persons and asylum seekers. In the absence of effective institutional mechanisms on global migration governance (Betts 2011), I posit that the concept of global citizenship holds promise in dealing with forced migration, delivering humanitarian aid programmes, refugee protection and developing partnership projects.

In this article, I will speak to some of the work done by a Canadian non-profit organisation, the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) in promoting education as a mechanism for achieving global citizenship. WUSC started as the International Student Services (ISS) by a group of European students interested in helping out student refugees during the First and Second World Wars. As documented by Peterson (2010), ISS had its first Canadian Chapter at the University of Toronto in 1939. As ISS supported refugees in the Middle East and Asia, the name eventually became World University Service in the 1950s with the first Canadian chapter initiated in 1957 (Peterson 2010). WUSC's mandates and activities have evolved over the decades to include local, national, and international programmes in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.¹ Notable activities include the Student Refugee Program (SRP); Shine a Light Campaign for promoting female education in refugee camps; Bike for Aids which helps HIV patients get access to medical treatment; Fair Trade and Ethical Purchasing; Student without Borders volunteer programme; and the International Summer Seminar that has run for more than six decades. In addition to these programmes, the Annual General Assembly and International Research Forum provides

¹ For details on these programmes see www.wusc.ca, last accessed April 5th 2012.

opportunities for WUSC staff members, volunteers, alumni, students, and global partners to actively engage on global issues.

WUSC, like many other international NGOs, has a policy framework for working within fragile contexts, whether the tasks involve delivering assistance in earthquake regions in Haiti, or in providing development assistance to war affected Afghanistan. The growing number of people living in fragile regions is estimated to be around a quarter of the world's population (UNHCR 2011), which provides an incentive for both state and non-state actors to contribute a shared understanding and empathy to human security. The *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States* is one of several codes of ethics for states and civil society groups applicable in these contexts.

After my forced migration from Freetown in January 1997, I travelled to several West African countries trying to find a 'home' away from home. I finally settled in the Gambia, where I lived for four years, teaching and doing volunteer research work. I eventually immigrated to Canada in the summer of 2003 because of its values of peace, human security, democratic principles and multiculturalism. Since I immigrated to Canada, I have continued graduate studies and been actively involved in international issues through many of WUSC's initiatives and events.

I was struck by the concept of global citizenship during my graduate studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC), particularly by a key note speech delivered by the former president of UBC, Martha Piper, in 2002. She emphasised that 'Our goal must be to educate global citizens who see themselves not simply as citizens of a local region, but also as human beings bound to other human beings in ties of concern and understanding' (quoted in Jefferess 2008). This notion resonated with me very well, having met many students, both local and international, who had a common belief in contributing to their communities and on international issues. As a member of the UBC's Global Citizenship Speakers Bureau, I started to explore ideas particularly around refugees and global citizenship. Despite the challenges involved in forced migration for most refugees, I was motivated by the fact that some refugees have risen above their individual hurdles to become leaders and address important issues. Prominent role models include Michaëlle Jean rising in her career to become the 27th Governor General of Canada in 2005, and Albert Einstein who made groundbreaking scientific discoveries and was awarded the Physics Nobel Prize in 1921. These examples and others have spurred interesting debates on individual and collaborative contribution to global peace and governance, environmental sustainability and human development.

What is the role of civil society groups in promoting peace and human development within forced migration? This is a question I have been pondering as a result of the growing role of non-state actors such as WUSC in assisting refugees with educational programmes. I argue that both individual and community obligations (in addition to state intervention) are crucial to understanding global issues and also to developing partnerships in contributing to the amelioration of these problems. My personal experience demonstrates how partnership programmes can foster education and global citizenship for social change. As a former student refugee member of WUSC-UBC Chapter, I personally benefitted from bursary and grants that assisted me through my Master's research (Khan *et al.* 2006). WUSC and its partners have done a remarkable job in helping to transform student refugees into global citizens, as well as engaging Canadian students and the general public on international issues. Starting in the mid-1970s, the SRP was designed to recruit student refugees from 'refugee camps to university campuses' (Goodwin 2010). Since 2008, about a thousand student refugees have been funded to immigrate to Canada, mostly from Africa, Asia, and Europe (Peterson 2010). This is one of the most 'transformative learning' programmes involving forced migrants in

Canadian history (Peterson 2010). The SRP is made possible through partnership with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, contributions from student levy, and various inputs from university administrations and international partners. The programme has enhanced Canadian communities in many ways; as demonstrated by growing civic participation, immigrant integration, leadership training, capacity building and socio-cultural attributes (Goodwin 2010; WUSC 2003).

Furthermore, some SRP alumni have contributed to both their new homes in Canada as well as being ambassadors and policy entrepreneurs to their countries of origin. Southern Sudan is a good case in point, where former SRP graduates have taken the challenge and returned to contribute. Although there is a debate regarding so-called 'brain drain' and 'brain gain' during international migrations (Faini 2007), there is evidence to suggest long-term benefits to both the native and host country (Ozden and Schiff 2006). The active roles played by WUSC SRP alumni in promoting peace and development through institutional partnerships across jurisdictional boundaries speak to the core values of global citizenship.

Over the years, I have found WUSC to be not only an academic organisation but also a social network to share ideas, develop partnerships, and to foster a sense of global citizenship. During my doctoral studies at Memorial University, many partnerships were developed amongst students, faculty and staff in reviving the local chapter and in promoting WUSC's belief that 'education changes the world'. Since 2009 for instance, the WUSC local Memorial chapter has recruited two student candidates for the International Summer Seminar activities to Southeast Asia and West Africa. Moreover, WUSC Memorial has organised Unitera funded workshops during the International Development Week on themes relating to the Millennium Development Goals. These learning opportunities also provide a forum for students and faculty to be engaged on international issues and on genuine discourse on the role of higher education in global citizenship. Despite its potential merits and relevance, global citizenship is an elusive concept, and thus presents many practical challenges as to what constitutes good practices or its *modus operandi*.

Global citizenship is also a research agenda that deserves further theoretical and empirical analyses, as has been argued by Carter (2001). Personally, I believe that global citizenship can also be understood as an *Ubuntu* philosophy, an African worldview that puts emphasis on the belief that 'I am what I am because of who we all are' (see Jefferess 2008). Global citizenship is also an essential paradigm as we live in a global village where moral and ethical responsibilities are fundamental in preserving our *Web of Life* (Capra 1986). Ignoring this connection has its consequences, as there is growing evidence that links forced migration with natural resource wars, power and tyranny, injustice and conflicts (Le Billon 2011). Such a research agenda does not necessarily focus on addressing forced migration and resettlement programmes exclusively, but also on tackling the root problems of weak governance systems that foster conflicts and to build an adaptive capacity to deal with natural disasters. The growing recognition of these challenges can be seen through emerging research agendas on migration and citizenship, public private partnerships, and individuals willing to contribute to these issues.

These personal reflections and critical thoughts are meant to be inspiring to refugees and non-refugees alike; and also to provide scholars and practitioners with an opportunity to genuinely collaborate and participate on global citizenship and forced migration discourse.

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