

## **SYLVAIN GAETAN, Refugees are not a Burden, but a Resource**

*This article outlines the personal journey of an asylum seeker. The author argues that refugees do not choose to leave their homes and everything they have. Refugees are often by-products of ongoing instability and violence. Refugees will continue to arrive as long as the causes for their flight are left unaddressed. The author further argues that refugees are not a burden but a great resource for their new host countries.*

I believe that I will still get a chance to return to my home country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), that I left in 2006. Back then, I had just joined a law firm and I was happy to be closer to my dream of being a well-established civil and human rights advocate. As part of my work, I was elected as chairman of the commission in charge of fighting violations in the electoral process. During the presidential campaign, various politicians tried to persuade me to support them. When I refused, they arrested me several times in an attempt to stop me from disclosing their violations. I was tortured and eventually almost died at the hands of my persecutors. When my persecutors thought I was dead, they left me on the shores of Lake Kivu. A day later, I found myself in a hospital without knowing how I got there.

It has been almost a decade since I fled with the assistance of Catholic priests. I still remember how different everything was to me when I arrived in Tanzania and later in Kenya: the culture, the people, the spoken language and even the weather. Straightaway, I was taken to Kakuma Refugee Camp, a place where no Kenyan would likely choose to live. It was an extremely hot and dry place, well known for the local "fauna" of scorpions and snakes, for the prevalence of malaria and diarrhea, and for its poor infrastructure and health facilities. Employment was low and refugees often worked as cheap labour on the same level as uneducated locals or with international organizations in exchange for basic needs. For example, we had the opportunity to monitor high school participation, but only received soap rather than a regular salary in return. It seemed like refugees were put to the test: if they persevered in such conditions, they proved their status as refugees and if not, they probably had a better place to go. Personally, I can say that if I had somewhere else to go, I would not have spent even a night in such a place. Unfortunately, I spent almost eight years there before I had the chance to leave.

Without a doubt, it was difficult to live in those conditions alone, far from my family and friends. It was even more painful to realize that after everything that I had done to receive my diploma, my refugee status meant that I needed to start from scratch since I could not use my skills as a lawyer in Kenya. The provisions in Kenya's 2006 Refugee Act outline the rights and duties of refugees and asylum seekers, including their right to work and the right to open a business. However, the reality is quite divergent from the rights enshrined in law. Although refugees can be granted work permits in Nairobi, they are bound to live in the camps unless authorized to live elsewhere. Ironically, having received a work permit is not a valid reason to apply for such an authorization to leave the refugee camps (Maina 2016).

It was clear that I did not have full control over my destiny, but only the ability to take advantage of the small opportunities that came my way. One of these opportunities came when I was lucky enough to return to school. I was able to learn English through Windle Trust Kenya. The Jesuit Refugee Services offered me an online study opportunity via Regis University. I decided to take this opportunity to start a new chapter of my life. The new language helped me integrate into Kenyan society more quickly. I could now offer my skills

to Kenyans as an interpreter and be accepted among the elites in the camp. I became a teacher of Congolese French to some managers and high profile individuals in the camp who were in need of a second international language. Luckily again, or with the help of God, some of these managers got promoted and acknowledged my contribution.

Under these extreme conditions, I learned to become creative. Whilst in Kakuma, I started an integrated English programme that accommodated refugees from all levels, enabling refugees to better contribute to the Kenyan community. For example, one of my students is now the founder of Happy for Life, a charity network promoting children's rights and quality education for Kenyan children living in the slums. My initiative enabled me to receive a scholarship to pursue my postgraduate degree in Community Development Studies in Jerusalem - offering me a way out of the camp. However, when I started to look for internship opportunities as part of the programme, I chose Kenya as I wished to give back to the country, at least for the asylum that I was granted and the life I had lived there for eight good years. In August 2015, I returned to Kenya - this time not as an asylum seeker but as a development practitioner. I started to focus on youth and women's empowerment in Homabay, one of the areas most affected by HIV/AIDS. Whilst I dedicated my time to support the local children at risk, I also took the opportunity to share my story with many and it became an example of the different destiny that refugees may have if they were offered the right opportunities.

Looking back, there are several important lessons that I wish to highlight. Firstly, no one chooses to be a refugee. From personal experience, I believe no one hates his or her home. As a matter of fact, I miss my home but feel unsafe to return. Refugees lose everything as they flee, including their careers, homes, and families. They need to be supported rather than pushed back to their countries.

More importantly, refugees are often produced by ongoing instability and violence. Host countries may punish, incarcerate or despise refugees, but refugees will continue to arrive as long as the causes for their flight are left unaddressed.

Finally, refugees are not a burden but a great resource. Their life journeys make them resilient and overcome obstacles. Refugees who work hard or are given an equal opportunity can contribute to the well-being of their new countries. Although I had to face restrictive and discriminative policies, my experiences helped me to find a new way to serve the people around me. My past struggles have fuelled my present dedication to fight atrocities, violence and corruption around the world - and I hope to share my story with many others around the world.

*Sylvain Gaetan is a human rights activist from the Democratic Republic of Congo, now seeking asylum in the United States, after being a refugee in Kenya for 8 years and staying in Israel for 18 months. He has a Master's in Global Community Development at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He shares his personal life experience of what it is like to become a refugee.*

## **Bibliography**

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