

AFRICA COMMITTEE

Memorandum to the Members of the Organising Committee for the
Conference on Refugees in Africa to be held in Arusha in May 1979

1. The attached table and notes present a rough indication of the numbers and proportions of different categories of refugees in Africa South of the Sahara. Members of the Committee will wish to make amendments from their own recent knowledge and experience, and it is to be hoped that UNHCR will provide more accurate figures. For the purpose of this memorandum, it is however the rough proportions of types of refugees that matter, and these seem most unlikely to be changed to an extent that would weaken the case being presented.
2. Of recognised refugees in Africa South of the Sahara, it seems likely that about 98-99 per cent are rural and about 1-2 per cent urban. If unrecognised refugees were added, the totals might perhaps double, but the proportions might not be much different. Of the rural refugees about one third or less are either settled or intended to be settled, and two thirds or more are left to fend very largely or entirely for themselves. Of the urban refugees perhaps one third, or less than one percent of all recognised refugees, may be active urban cases.
3. Urban refugees have many problems. Nothing that follows is meant to detract either from their need or from the work done to assist them. The concern here is with a sense of proportion.
4. It is important, in seeking that sense of proportion, to start by recognising biases which direct attention, services, resources and opportunities towards urban individual cases. Urban refugees are articulate, often educated, able to communicate, and able to present their problems with some immediacy to governments and to counselling and other agency staff. The professional skills of counselling can be recruited to handle these problems. Many professional staff find it more congenial to live in urban areas than in rural. The richer countries have something to provide in the form of scholarships abroad. The traditions of refugee work, formed as they were so much in Europe, are oriented towards individual cases, legal and protection issues, and counselling - all of which fit the needs of the relatively few urban refugees more readily than the mass of rural refugees. On both the

demand side - articulate and educated refugees presenting urban offices with problems that have to be dealt with - and on the supply side of professional services, counselling and scholarships, it is easy to appreciate why there should be an urban bias in refugee work in Africa.

5. Opposite biases operate with rural refugees. They are typically poorly educated, remote and inaccessible, ignorant of their rights, and unable to bring their plight to the notice of distant urban authorities. The one third or less who are settled or intended to be settled do receive some attention; and it is well known that excellent work has been done with agricultural settlements for refugees in many African countries, to the credit both of the host countries and of the agencies involved. Nevertheless, even refugees in settlements receive far less per person in attention, resources, and opportunities than do urban refugees. And in the case of the two thirds or more of all refugees who are rural and for whom settlement is not intended, assistance is often nil or negligible.
6. It is sometimes argued that this majority of refugees who have to look after themselves are best left alone. They have "spontaneously integrated" - a phrase which gives the impression that all is well. Traditional hospitality, it is suggested, especially between ethnic kin, solves the problem. This belief is convenient because it absolves agencies and governments from finding out about and doing something about problems which are potentially large. It is somehow easier to shut out a vast figure than a smaller one. 5,000 refugees are manageable. 500,000 - a hundred times more - roughly the figure for Angolans in Zaire for many years, are too large a problem. If they are not causing any political problems, the temptation is then to leave "well" alone.
7. But is it well? Much depends on the scale of the problem and on local conditions. Rural refugees may be welcomed by the local rural elite for whom they provide cheap and docile labour and the most generous of their hosts may often be the poorer people who can themselves least afford to give. Where influxes of rural refugees are large they create acute conditions both for themselves and for the poorer people among their hosts. They drive food prices up and wages down, shifting the terms of trade against their main asset and that of other poor people - their

labour. They often get exploitative exchange rates for any money they have been able to bring with them. They may have little access to health and educational services, standing as they do at the end of the queue. Most seriously, and contrary to common belief, access to land is liable to be insecure. Examples are known from four countries where refugees have been either driven off the land, or moved from the area in which they had settled themselves. Spontaneous integration may mean extreme poverty and insecurity, eking out precarious and marginal existence through casual labour and migration. The deprivation of such refugees may go unnoticed. They are dispersed. They may not present themselves to officials or to hectic visiting missions. They may, indeed, constitute a rural sub-proletariat, powerless, inarticulate, and unseen.

8. This picture is suggested by scattered pieces of evidence. If it is correct, then it is important to find out more. Both the urban official who wants to leave "well" alone, and the do-gooder who wants to rush out and take vigorous action, are in danger of acting in ignorance. The priority is to find out more about situations which are not easy to find out about.
9. There are many reasons why such investigations may not be carried out. There are problems of remoteness and of language. What are needed are people able and willing to conduct sensitive rural research rather than those with legal and counselling skills which ^{usually} predominate. It is obviously easier for urban officials to deal with urban refugees than rural. There are also urban staff who dislike rural travel. To recognise these tendencies, however painful it may be, is a first step towards remedies.
10. In this context, the conference on refugees in Africa presents a great danger and a great opportunity. The danger is that it will reinforce these professional and elite biases in refugee work, to the convenient neglect of vastly more numerous rural groups. Lawyers may talk to lawyers, counsellors to counsellors, and people concerned with elite refugees in the rich countries with those concerned with elite refugees in the urban areas of African countries. They will find common

problems and can use a common language. But, in this case, they will be concerning themselves with only a tiny minority, perhaps one per cent, of African refugees as a whole.

11. The opportunity is that the conference might dramatically improve understanding and knowledge of that great majority of refugees who are rural, and especially of those who are not in agricultural settlements, and of what can be done to help them. In the hope that this will be possible, the following suggestions are presented to the Organising Committee:

(i) to allocate conference time so that one third is devoted to urban refugees, and refugees in the richer countries; on third to rural refugees in agricultural settlements or for whom there are substantive assistance programmes; and one third to rural refugees for whom there is no programme.

(ii) to commission studies of the situation and life experiences of rural refugees, country by country, especially those for whom there is no programme, so that case studies can be presented to the conference.

12. These measures might only go some of the way towards an equitable balance and meeting the need. But they would indicate that the Organising Committee wished to make the conference an occasion which would break significant new ground; and they would mark an important step towards recognising and assisting those African refugees - the overwhelming majority - who are poor, remote and powerless.

January 1979

Note This paper was prepared by Mr. Robert Chambers, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex and an individual member of the Africa Committee

Annex table: CATEGORIES OF REFUGEES IN AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

	I	II	III
	Total Refugees	Being settled or to be settled	Remainder
Cameroon	2,000 + not known	2,000	not known
Gabon	60,000	4,000	56,000
Zaire	530,000	22,000	508,000
Angola	250,000	220,000	30,000
Zambia	64,000	13,000	51,000
Botswana	20,000	4,000	16,000
Sudan	260,000	31,500	228,500
Djibouti	13,000	2,000	11,000
Ethiopia	11,800	11,800	-
Kenya	6,000	4,000	2,000
Tanzania	167,000	152,000	15,000
Mozambique	70,000	50,000	20,000
TOTALS	1,453,800	516,300	937,500
Percentages	100	36	64

Source: UNHCR: News from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, No. 4, July/August 1978 pp.4-5.

PTO

