

Uganda: understanding their needs, ensuring their education

Kampala, 11th January 2017 – Isaac Ijjo's life has always straddled a border. Once a refugee in former-Sudan in the 1980s, he later returned to Uganda to assist in the JRS response to Sudanese refugees in the 2000s until they returned home to South Sudan after independence. But with the emerging and ongoing conflict in South Sudan, he returned to JRS to lead the JRS project in Adjumani, Uganda.

This interview gives a taste of his current mission to give back to the South Sudanese community who once hosted him and his family:

How would you describe your journey with JRS?

I started working with JRS in 1999 during the first influx of Sudanese refugees (during the last civil war in South Sudan). I was working, first as a teacher in Alere secondary school (the first secondary school for refugees in Adjumani), and then I joined JRS as the education supervisor and I worked with JRS until 2008 when the refugees repatriated.

How is this situation for refugees different from the years before?

This refugee influx from December 2013 is peculiar in the sense that we have one ethnic group, mostly the Dinkas and morule, who were not in Uganda during the 1990s' Sudanese refugee influx. The difference now is that this group is completely different culturally speaking. But in general, the refugee challenges are the same – the issues of the lack of food, the issues of basic necessities like health services and education are pretty much the same. Also, the government of Uganda continues to give them priority, to help them as refugees without discrimination on ethnic or tribal grounds.

How do you describe the conditions where they live?

One of the positive things I see here is the hospitality of the host communities and the government of Uganda. When the refugees come they are offered pieces of land to settle in and cultivate. The plots are not that big (30mx30m) but the idea is to be able to settle and plant some food so that they are not entirely dependent on food aid which is not sustainable. Freedom of movement is also made possible they are given identity cards. More importantly, the refugees are allowed to work like Ugandan nationals which presents them an opportunity for them to integrate even faster than if they were in camps, like in other countries.

In what ways is JRS fulfilling its mission here?

JRS is supporting secondary school education. This was the greatest, most urgent need expressed to JRS during our Needs Assessment. We sponsor students in five secondary schools with their tuition needs and we expect parents to help in terms of scholastic materials. We also provide text books and other learning materials to the schools. And to retain girls in school, we recently started distribution of sanitary pads and soap for because we realized girls frequently fall out or miss classes due to lack of these materials. We also support games and sports music, dance and drama in the secondary schools. One of the schools St.Mary Assumpta Girls recently beat all odds to compete up to the regional level in Nairobi. JRS also support the Parents, Teachers Associations (PTAs) and schools' boards of governors because we realized that there are weak governance structures in the secondary schools.

And finally, we do teacher training, particularly in subject areas where the schools are not performing mainly in science and computer lessons, and generally, in interpreting national exams.

What are the biggest needs in terms of education?

Access to secondary education remains biggest need for both refugees and the host community. According to an analysis carried out by UNHCR in September 2016, a whopping **26,657** secondary school going age 14-20 years in Adjumani have no access to education due to lack of school fees.

The second need is infrastructure. Many of the schools are becoming dilapidated and the water and sanitation systems are not proper. Finally teacher training is another great need as the capacity of many of the teachers is still

low. Currently, there are only 60 graduate teachers against the required 112 for 14 secondary schools. The rest of the teachers numbering 219, have grade V Diploma in Education qualification.

Why is secondary education important?

Secondary education helps prepare the young people transition to meaningful livelihoods and gainful employment. Secondary education also helps students have a meaningful life after primary school - it reduces early marriages for girls and gives boys constructive activities. And JRS focuses more on secondary education as mentioned since this was the unmet need in the area.

What are we doing for the host community?

In an effort to promote integration JRS beneficiaries are 70% refugees and 30% from the host community as encouraged by UNHCR, the Ugandan government and humanitarian partners.

When you look forward to the future, what do you hope the future impact of JRS work will be?

Given our focus in increasing access to secondary education, computer literacy and teacher training, I expect the impact to be that the next generation of South Sudanese and Ugandans through quality Secondary School education will be prepared to assist in the peaceful development of their countries.