

# The Refugee Resettlement Scheme is the Golden Ticket but Very Scarce for Many in Africa: Prospects and Challenges During COVID-19

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## *Abstract*

*The refugee resettlement scheme is a window of hope for millions of refugees across the globe. It is an opportunity that grants refugees a durable solution, especially those who cannot voluntarily return to their countries of origin due to fear of persecution. The golden ticket, as seen by many, is resettlement to Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. COVID-19, the reluctance by western countries to commit to responsibility-sharing, along with other constraints confronting the process of granting settlement to refugees generated barriers to resettlement in 2020. Resettlement opportunities have been scarce for many refugees in Africa, particularly those refugees with protracted cases. The consequences are reflected in an increase in the use of irregular migration routes to Europe rather than relying on the established resettlement scheme. This paper aims to provide an overview of the options for a durable solution, exploring and discussing the prospects and challenges during the era of COVID-19. In conclusion, the data derived from the literature review and 12 key informant interviews suggests that the impact of COVID-19 on the resettlement scheme and the implementation of Africa's first free trade area that promises to increase human mobility provides an opportunity for the international community to reimagine the golden ticket. Supported by the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compact on Refugees, local integration and resettlement within Africa should be the new achievable gold standard.*

*Keywords: Refugee Resettlement, Displacement, Durable Solutions, Sub-Saharan Africa, COVID-19*

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## Introduction / Background

On 11 March 2020, the swift spread of SARS-CoV-2 (Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) e.g. COVID-19, resulted in a declaration by the World Health Organization (WHO), of a global pandemic (WHO 2021). In response to the WHO declaration, most African governments implemented measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission including closing international borders, restricting inter-state travel as well as implementing social distancing measures that impacted schools, businesses, and social amenities. Although the magnitude of COVID-19 infections and death rate is not comparable to the experience in China, Europe, and the USA, in part due to lack of reporting, the African continent was nonetheless immensely affected (Greenaway, Hargreaves, Barkati, Coyle, Gobbi, Veizis, Douglas 2020). For refugees in Africa, their plight was exacerbated by closed borders, lack of access to information around the virus and government preventative measures, lack of access to healthcare, limited access to humanitarian services and densely populated living conditions. In addition, challenges to basic hygiene such as access to clean water translated into higher risk for COVID-19 transmission.

Africa is host to an estimated 8 million refugees and 24 million internally displaced persons, making it the region with the highest need for refugee resettlement worldwide (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2021). In 2020, prior to COVID-19, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) projected 667,432 refugees in need of resettlement from 32 different African countries of asylum (UNHCR 2019b). On March 10, 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UNHCR suspended resettlement processes impacting an estimated 10'000 refugees (Kluge, Jakab, Bartovic, D'anna, Severoni 2020; Bukuluki, Mwenyango, Katongole, Sidhva 2020; Red Cross 2020). To compound matters, within the first six months of 2020, Africa experienced an increase in the number of displaced persons, while the number of resettled refugees dropped to the lowest it has been in nearly two decades (Mbiyozo 2021). Travel restrictions and government COVID-19 prevention measures are largely to blame for the low number of resettled refugees.

## Methodology

The research for this paper, was undertaken using a qualitative research methods approach that included a literature review and 12 semi-structured key informant interviews. Key informant interviews were carried out from June 2021 to August 2021. Many of the interviews were for information gathering while others served to provide context and expert advice. Interviews were conducted with representatives from international organizations, policy institutes, local refugee-led organizations and refugees. The information collected was used to substantiate the findings and central argument of this paper

## Durable solutions to the problem of refugees: A conceptual analysis

A refugee remains in a state of limbo, or displacement, until they have sought out or been provided a durable solution to their displacement. This can take the form of voluntary repatriation,

local integration, or resettlement. However, before a refugee can explore options for durable solutions, they must first undergo an intensive screening and assessment by the UNHCR. Once a refugee's status has been determined based on internationally agreed upon criteria carried out by UNCHR or the host government (UNHCR 2020c; UNHCR 2021c), urgent protection needs are dealt with, and refugees are placed in designated refugee camps or urban settings.

To be eligible for services and support both by UNHCR as well as most host governments individuals must meet the legal definition of a refugee. The legal definition has evolved over the years as circumstances have required. Established in Article 1 of the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is defined as an individual who has fled their country of origin for reasons such as fear of persecution, conflict, generalized violence or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and has resulted in the requirement of international protection (UN 2021). The original definition confined refugee status to individuals who had been affected by European events on or before January 1, 1951. In 1967, a protocol was adopted to remove the geographical and temporal limitations, meaning that the application of the term refugee could be universally applied to an individual who met the criteria outlined in Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention irrespective of the time of the event or location. Furthermore, The Convention underpins several fundamental principles including non-refoulement, the provision against returning an individual to their place of origin when there is a known danger of persecution or violence (UNHCR 2010). In addition, it protects refugees from being penalized for illegal entry or stay.

Sub-Saharan Africa is host to 26% of the world's refugee population (UNHCR 2021a). This is recognized through the African Union's 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, the first regional refugee convention in the world (Adebe 2017). The 1969 Convention aligns with the 1951 Geneva Convention as well as the 1967 Protocol (OAU 1969). In 2009, Africa once again became the first to develop the first legally binding refugee convention with the adoption of the Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention). Despite this, there remains a lack of legal refugee frameworks at the state level that ensures the protection of refugee rights and access to government services. This legal gap in refugee protection has been exacerbated by COVID-19 preventing humanitarian agencies to intervene in situations where the host governments cannot or will not support refugees and leaving little recourse for refugees or the international community to hold the governments accountable.

A refugee camp or placement in a host community is a temporary solution meant to provide shelter and assistance in the immediate future until a durable solution can be found. However, because of the instability of the temporary solutions given to refugees in the immediate aftermath of their status determination, the need for a long-term solution for refugees to live in peace and dignity becomes inevitable (Georgia 2016).

To this end, a major challenge facing Africa is to find a durable solution to refugees' displacement, especially those who have been waiting in camps and host communities for many years. In recent years, refugees who have lost hope of resettlement or the *golden ticket* have resorted to irregular migration (Mbiyozo 2021). In 2020, 95'031 reached the shores of Europe via land and sea, most seeking asylum upon arrival (UNHCR 2021g). This places the search for durable solutions towards refugees at the centre of UNHCR, governments, and civil society's

efforts to end refugees' displacement. Historically, the notion of durable solutions is about solving the problem permanently, either in the country of origin, host country or a third country (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, Sigona 2014). While resettlement is the most sought durable solution by refugees, it is also the most difficult to attain requiring intensive screening and long waits and for these reasons voluntary repatriation and local integration are often seen as first line options over resettlement (Adebe 2017; Phone interview with UNHCR, 12 May 2021).

In the following sections, voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement will be explored highlighting the challenges faced during COVID-19 as well as opportunities for the future.

### *Voluntary Repatriation*

Voluntary repatriation is the preferred solution to displacement for both the international community and the country of asylum but is not always the best solution for refugees. The degree to which voluntary repatriation is indeed *voluntary* is often debated (Ogata 1993). For many, the decision to return is attributed to a combination of pressures such as political factors, security, material needs and/or the absence of a viable alternative (Ogata 1993).

An example where repatriation was less voluntary is the case of Burkina Faso and the Goudoubo Refugee Camp. Burkina Faso had been a place of safe harbour for thousands of Malian refugees looking to escape the years-long violence, but in early 2020, Burkina Faso saw a massive surge in violence itself. Goudoubo came under threat of attackers in early March of 2020 and of the 9'000 Malians in the camp, 5'000 decided to return to Mali after less than 2 years in the refugee camp (UN News 2020).

UNCHR often assess the factors contributing to refugees' decision to *voluntarily repatriate*, an important factor is whether the country of asylum recognizes the legal status of a refugee. If not, this could contribute to pressures to repatriate and eliminate the prospect of local integration due to lack of recognition of rights and limited to no access to local government services and institutions.

Since the 1990s, refugee repatriation records show that 7 million refugees have returned to their home countries (Van Bruaene 2001 cited in Crisp 2003; Georgia 2016). To promote this pathway, UNHCR, the international community and the country of origin plays an important role in information sharing and encouraging refugees to go home. In this regard, platforms such as *come and see* and *go tell others* are used. This strategy is widely used in Africa, for countries like Rwanda, Angola, Somalia, and Uganda and has been effective as hundreds of thousands of refugees have returned home as result of those campaigns (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014; Georgia 2016). Successful large-scale repatriation efforts in Africa include the repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees from neighbouring Guinea and Liberia. Over the course of three years, UNHCR assisted 178'000 Sierra Leoneans to repatriate while 92'000 returned on their own. Of the estimated 490'000 that fled the 10-year civil war, around 55% voluntarily repatriated (IRIN News 2004). The voluntary repatriation of refugees to Sierra Leon was done through a concerted effort with the government of Sierra Leon and UNCHR. Repatriated refugees were provided incentives to return such as transportation allowance, food, and home goods (The New Humanitarian 2004). Repatriated refugees play an important role in rebuilding their country emphasizing voluntary repatriation as a means for a durable solution and peace and reconciliation in Africa.

Often, the country of origin implements mechanisms that accommodate refugees in a manner that encourage refugees to return and be involved in developing the country.

During COVID-19, voluntary repatriation efforts were impacted by border closures and government prevention measures thwarting returns. Or, as in the case of refugee returns to the Central African Republic (CAR) from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), insecurity and intractable conflicts combined or alternating with COVID-19 travel restrictions challenged the conditions for return (Mbiyozo 2021; UNHCR 2021f). Despite the wait, an estimated 10'000 refugees from CAR out of 47'000 living in Inke camp, North Ubangi province, and in Mole and Boyabu camps in South Ubangi province have volunteered for repatriation (UNHCR 2021f). However, for many refugees return is not a solution. Instead, local integration and resettlement are sought after alternatives.

### *Local integration*

In contrast to voluntary repatriation, local integration can benefit the refugee by enabling the refugee to integrate into the country or community where they have sought shelter. Local integration is increasingly advocated for by the international community in light of a decrease in the number of refugees resettled (UN News 2020a). Local integration is often the preferred durable solution for protracted cases. As the name entails, local integration is implemented by the host country to offer refugees permanent legal status in their community of temporary asylum. According to international legal refugee conventions, local integration is achieved when refugees are offered full and permanent membership and resident status by the host government in a judicially accepted manner. This occurs through the process of economic, legal, social, and cultural integration of refugees in their community in order that the integrated refugees can enjoy all refugee rights as stipulated in 1951 Convention. Article 34 of the 1951 Refugee Convention calls for host states to integrate refugees: "The contracting States shall as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees. They shall in particular make every effort to expedite naturalization proceedings."

In the context of Africa, local integration is seen as a low priority option for refugees, with few refugees integrating into host communities. This is often due to barriers associated with government policies rather than a lack of desire to integrate. However, local integration has become an integral part of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compact on Refugees. Countries such as Tanzania, Rwanda and Zambia have been at the forefront of promoting and practicing local integration as a durable solution to protracted cases of refugee situations. Given the right circumstances, local integration can happen organically as refugees interact with their host community through economic and educational activities. Most camps are *open* meaning that refugees can come and go with limited restriction (depending on the country) and thus may engage with their host community on a daily basis. However, not all refugees in Africa reside in camps but instead move or are placed in urban areas and host communities. Relocation from a camp settlement can be for economic reasons or as in the case of LGBTQ refugees in Kenya, for their personal safety (Interview with the Foundation for LBQ Refugees 29 July 2021). A resounding debate against local integration is the economic impact it could have on the host communities. However, a study conducted by Fajth and

colleagues on the impact of Congolese refugees in Rwanda on the social life of the host community found that economic interaction between the two populations builds trust over time and the presence of refugees has a positive economic impact on the community (Fajth, Bilgili, Loschmann, Siegel 2019).

State policies that allow for freedom of movement, access to social services such as health and education and the right to seek employment, such as those implemented in Rwanda should be emulated in other countries with protracted displacement (Fajth et al. 2019; Crawford, Holloway, Lowe 2019). Regionally, the visa free movement of people across Africa through the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), similar to Europe's Schengen Area, is anticipated to connect 1.3 billion people across 55 countries (World Bank 2020). The agreement which has been ratified by 38 countries including CAR, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, refugee hosting countries (Tralac 2021). AfCFTA could have a positive effect on refugee integration and resettlement within Africa by lifting barriers to mobility and providing economic opportunities within host and neighbouring countries.

While most countries in Africa are still reluctant to adopt local integration policies, thousands of refugees live in those countries with no hope of being locally integrated and without freedom of movement, access to local government services or support outside of those specific to refugee assistance. Other countries in Africa tend to see refugees as burdens of responsibility rather than beneficial to them and exercise closed-door policy towards refugees, (Jacobsen 2001; Milner 2014).

### Current Resettlement Process

The current African refugee resettlement process is determined in partnership with UNHCR, local and international humanitarian organizations, and the local authorities responsible for the hosting/reception of the refugees. The criterion for resettlement is determined through these partnerships and are country specific as they relate to the specific country's resettlement policies and guidelines. Since 2018, UNHCR in coordination with the international community has emphasized expanding access to resettlement in third countries through the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the Global Compact on Refugees. Of the 15 CRRF roll out countries, eight are within Africa. These countries are Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia. Under this plan, yearly projections are made for the numbers of refugees that would need resettlement, as seen in Table 1 (UNHCR 2020d).

*TABLE 1: UNHCR Projected Number of Refugees in Need of Resettlement in 2020 Within the African Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework roll-out countries (UNHCR 2021e:17-23)*

Country of Origin	No. of Refugees in Need of Resettlement
South Sudan	181'420
Somalia	57'900
DRC	46'320

Sudan	34'740
Central African Republic	23'160
<b>Total</b>	<b>343'540</b>

To realize the ambitions of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, the UN established a three-year Strategy (2019-2021) on resettlement and complementary pathways, which envisaged 70,000 resettlement departures to 31 countries (UNHCR 2019a). The Strategy emphasizes burden and responsibility sharing and focuses on expanding the number of resettlement countries as well as the number of refugee resettlement spaces of third countries. During the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, a follow-up to the Strategy, 32 States made 58 pledges towards resettlement and complementary pathway efforts. These pledges included items from African countries such as Nigeria's pledged to include refugees, IDPs, returnees and their communities in the National Government development plans (GCR 2021). These efforts emphasize the important role resettlement serves in ending the refugee cycle and the necessity for the international community and third countries to expand resettlement options for refugees. Resettlement efforts hit a setback in 2020 with the global pandemic.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on the Resettlement Scheme in Sub-Saharan Africa**

On March 10, 2020, the IOM and the UNHCR suspended refugee resettlement in the wake of worldwide travel restrictions (Kluge et al. 2020). The hold was lifted on 18 June 2020, after 10,000 refugee resettlements were deferred. Some travel restrictions remain in place and continue to delay life-saving departures (UNHCR 2020a). In addition, expiration of security checks and overseas health examinations postponed travel for months, after the resumption of the resettlement program (Bhattacharya, Fisher 2020). For some refugees, this meant a prolonging of family separation (Phone interview with refugee on 1 July 2021). Precedents from Ebola and SARS show that travel bans additionally incite stigma for migrant communities already in host countries (Lau, Samari, Moresky, Casey, Kachur, Roberts, Zard 2020). Suspensions tend to harm refugees without benefiting host countries because many migrants would travel from an unaffected country to a nation with already high case counts. According to a World Health Organization report in 2018, refugees are at a low risk of transferring communicable disease to the host population in general (Kluge et al. 2020).

Newly arrived refugees also face reduced volunteer and public services during the pandemic (Kluge et al. 2020). Volunteers and staff may be quarantined or restricted by government mandates, which disturbs provision of resettlement resources (Júnior, de Sales, Moreira, Pinheiro, Lima, Netoc 2019). For example, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Charlottesville, Virginia typically provides an orientation for refugees attending their first medical appointment. Staff members transport clients to the family medicine clinic and show them how to find the waiting room and register. COVID-19 restrictions do not allow such transportation or accompaniment, and refugees must navigate the unfamiliar health system alone (E. Uhlmann MPH, phone interview, 16 July 2021).

### Third Country Resettlement

Third country resettlement, or the *golden ticket*, is mostly implemented by Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The impact of COVID-19 on the resettlement scheme was felt at all levels, including recipient countries. Governments grappled with how to maintain public health while also meeting their commitments and providing safety and support for refugees. The results have been a delay in resettlement, causing a backlog of resettlement cases leading governments to increase their resettlement quotas for 2021 to accommodate for the impact of COVID-19.

Table 2: Golden Ticket Refugee Resettlement Numbers 2020 Expected vs. Accepted and 2021 Expected Number of Refugees for Resettlement

Country	No. Refugees Expected for 2020	Source	No. Refugees Resettled in 2020	Source	No. Refugees Expected in 2021	Source
Europe	21'700	(UNHCR 2021d)	11'150	UNHCR, 2021d	30'000	(European Commission 2019)
United States	18'000	(Monin, Batalova, Lai 2021)	11'800	(Monin et al. 2021)	300'000 new asylum claimants	(U.S. Department of State 2020)
Canada	30'000	(IRCC 2020)	9'000	(Paperny 2021)	36'000	(Paperny 2021)
Australia	18'750	(RCA 2019:3)	11'521	(Remeikis 2020)	13'750	(Jones, Wazefadost 2021)
New Zealand	750-1'000	(New Zealand Government 2020)	210	(New Zealand Government 2020)	1'500	(New Zealand Government 2020)

#### Europe

Prior to the outbreak of the global pandemic, European countries pledged more than 30'000 resettlement places for refugees in 2020 (European Commission 2019). Due to COVID-19 only 21'700 refugee cases were submitted for resettled across 18 countries in Europe while only 11'150 refugees arrived for resettlement (UNHCR 2021d). Of those who made the resettlement submissions to Europe, the majority (67%) were from Africa and were predominately resettled in Sweden, Norway, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Finland, Switzerland, the Nether-

lands and Denmark (UNHCR 2020d). During the pandemic, European countries saw an increase in the number of refugee and migrant arrivals from irregular migration routes than in previous years (EASO 2021).

### *United States*

Historically, the United States has been one of the top countries in the world for refugee resettlement. However, since 2018, the number of refugees resettled has steadily decreased (Radord, Connor 2019). In 2020, those numbers hit rock bottom with only 11'800 refugees resettled out of the anticipated 18'000, the lowest numbers since the establishment of the refugee admissions program in the United States (Monin et al. 2021). This is in part due to the suspension of the refugee resettlement program by UNHCR and IOM, which the United States quickly responded to by pausing refugee admissions (Alvarez 2020). An exception was made for emergency cases (CMS 2020). Irrespective of challenges imposed by COVID-19, 24% of refugees received were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Monin et al. 2021). In response to the impact of COVID-19 on the refugee admissions program, and the existing backlog of asylum claims made within the United States, the United States anticipates receiving more than 300'000 new asylum claimants and refugees in fiscal year 2021 (U.S. Department of State 2020).

### *Canada*

Canada, by its own admission is restricted by COVID-19 prevention measures put in place by the government as well as around the world hindering the resettlement process (IRCC 2021). In 2020, Canada anticipated settling over 30'000 refugees through its refugee admissions program, twice the anticipated number of the United States (IRCC 2020). However, due to COVID-19, only an estimated 9'000 were resettled (Paperny 2021). The government has raised the refugee admissions quota to 36'000 for 2021, but there are concerns that continued measures taken to prevent COVID-19 will hinder achieving this figure (Paperny 2021).

### *Australia and New Zealand*

COVID-19 along with budget cuts to the refugee resettlement program impacted the Australian resettlement program causing a 30% drop in the number of anticipated refugees resettled in 2020. Despite this, Australia welcomed 11'521 refugees in 2020 (Remeikis 2020). Unlike many governments who are adjusting their refugee admissions numbers to account for the delays associated with COVID-19 and public health measures, Australia has established a ceiling of 13'750 for 2021-2022 (Jones, Wazefadost 2021).

New Zealand implemented aggressive COVID-19 prevention measures which included halting refugee resettlement from March 2020 until February 2021. As of June 2021, only 210 refugees had been resettled through New Zealand's Refugee Quota Program (RQP) out of an anticipated 750-1'000 (New Zealand Government 2020). New Zealand's resettlement quota is capped at 1'500 annually but because of the continued prevalence of COVID-19 impacting international travel, the refugee quota of 1'500 places is unlikely to be met yet again (New Zealand Government 2020).

## The Growing Resettlement Need in Africa

Though the pandemic greatly impacted the number of refugees able to be resettled in 2020, UNHCR is encouraged by the fact that 20 countries, still resumed their programs, processing and receiving refugees throughout the year. Many of these implemented innovative and flexible ways to process cases throughout the pandemic. Resettlement activities resumed in late 2020, prioritizing refugees with compelling protection needs and by the end of the year, 22'770 refugees were resettled in 22 states (UNHCR 2021e). The vast discrepancy between need and the number of refugees accepted by third countries emphasizes the need for a global expansion of refugee admissions programs advocated within the Global Compact on Refugees as well as humanitarian organizations such as the UN Refugee Agency. To put the scale of need in perspective, according to UNHCR, the 2022 projected resettlement needs for the Africa region are estimated at 593'598 refugees covering 33 different countries of asylum and representing 40% of the total global resettlement needs (UNHCR 2021e). Although there was a slight decline in the total projected needs from 2021 (616'958) to 2022 (593'598) the projected resettlement needs in the Africa region continue to be the highest in the world (UNHCR 2020d; UNHCR 2021e).

*Table 3: Africa: 2022 Projected Resettlement Needs by Region of Asylum (UNHCR 2021e:17-23)*

<b>Region of Asylum</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>Needs</b>
East Africa, Horn of Africa and Great Lakes	121'952	439'842
Southern Africa	13'815	55'361
West and Central Africa	27'181	98'395
<b>Total</b>	<b>162'948</b>	<b>593'598</b>

## Human Impact: Refugee Perspective

### *Expiration of health screening and background check*

The impact of COVID-19 on refugee resettlement is much more than numbers. Interviews with refugees awaiting resettlement during COVID-19 found that those who were awaiting resettlement during the height of COVID-19 were left in a state of limbo, some near destitution after having sold their belongings, ended employment, and disconnected from their host community in preparation for departure. Due the travel restrictions, their departures were delayed, little information has been communicated on when they might be able to resettle. The duration of the restrictions along with increased public health measures has also meant that refugees may have to undergo additional health screenings before being able to resettle while existing health

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screenings, which are part of the resettlement screening process, expire while waiting for relocation.

According to refugees in Zimbabwe, those who were in the last phase of processing their resettlement faced the expiration of security and health screening checks/results. This had a psychological impact on them. One refugee noted that

*I sold my personal belongings hoping to go to the United States, but when COVID-19 came our health screening checks expired. It's almost two years now we have not heard from the resettlement officer about our situation, COVID-19 ended my hope. My hope is now in God's hands because we are suffering in this refugee camp. (Phone interview with a refugee on 1 July 2021).*

This reflects a reality of challenges facing refugees because of COVID-19 and its impact on the resettlement program in Africa.

### *Delays in Reunification*

Family reunification is another vital aspect of resettlement impacted by COVID-19. Most refugees hope to be reunited with families who are in diasporas or those resettled through UNHCR. Some refugees spend years apart, awaiting reunification. The pause on the resettlement program due to COVID-19 also caused significant delays in reunification of refugees with their loved ones. A refugee in Nocheival Refugee Camp, Uganda, hoping to reunite with their family member in Canada alluded to how his hope of meeting his long-time loved ones was negatively impacted by COVID-19.

*I was almost done with all the necessary requirements, I was only waiting for the visa, but COVID-19 disturbed everything. Resettlement stopped and travelling was halted. Up to today I am still hoping for my resettlement case to resume but have no update (Phone interview with refugee on 1 July 2021)*

noted by an interviewed refugee based in Uganda.

### *Vulnerability to Personal Security Threats*

The suspension of the resettlement program increased vulnerabilities for refugees seeking resettlement based on threats to their personal security. As told by a Congolese refugee in Cape town South Africa,

*Since the outbreak of COVID-19, my resettlement protection case has been in limbo. I was supposed to go to Canada. We have been ordered not to come to UNHCR offices. Now, I am not able to make a follow-up appointment on my protection case. I am now vulnerable, and I have no one to tell me about my personal security issues. I live in hiding and when I try to contact the protection officer; his phone contact is not picked up. My resettlement hope is now gone, and I have nowhere to go. (Phone Interview with a refugee based in Cape Town South Africa, 29 December 2021)*

This scenario reflects the personal security challenges faced by many refugees waiting for resettlement during COVID-19 in Africa.

### *Barriers to Education*

The suspension of travel threatened access to higher learning for many young refugees seeking education as a pathway to resettlement. Refugees from Malawi's Dzaleka Camp accepted into the World University Service Canada Student Refugee Program, a program that combines resettlement with higher education, had their resettlement and education postponed (Phone interview with WUSC representative on 18 January 2022). Some refugees who expected to resettle in 2021 are still waiting for approval to travel in 2022. In addition, the emergence of new COVID-19 variants continues to impact the program as governments act to safeguard communities. As of December 2021, it is mandatory for all travelers entering Canada to be fully vaccinated (Government of Canada 2021). While the COVID-19 vaccine is available in public hospitals in Malawi, refugees who are unwilling or unable to get the vaccine are dropped from the program. Overall, the increased procedures and lack of certainty has had a negative impact on refugees awaiting resettlement through the Refugee Student Program.

*The uncertainty has caused a lot of worry and anxiety. For this, we encourage them to speak on their issues and have provided counseling services to help them cope. They have also been encouraged to read materials and get involved in activities in the camp more, in order to keep busy. (Phone interview with WUSC representative on 18 January 2022)*

### *Mental Health*

Issues surrounding mental health among refugees intensified due to the subsequent pandemic related lockdowns, cessation of social services, and the suspension of resettlement (UNHCR 2020e). In conversations with refugees, Jacob Tornga with the International Association for Refugees felt the suspension of resettlement had a significant impact on refugees.

*One family that was selected for resettlement in 2018-2019 have been waiting for three years. It has had a significant impact on their general mental health and outlook on life. [...] it has been a struggle of knowing what to do on a daily basis. Do I get involved? Should I send my kids to school? [...] They go to the UN office, but there really isn't anything that*

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*can be told to them. They have the impression that resettlement could happen overnight, and they need to be ready. (Virtual interview with Jacob Tornga, International Association for Refugees on 21 January 2022).*

In contrast, many refugees have given up hope of resettlement. The emergence of infrastructure such as banks, businesses and fueling stations provide a feeling of permanence giving the impression that many are resolved to carving out a live in the camp.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, COVID-19 had a significant impact on the refugee resettlement scheme causing a three-month suspension of activities and continued considerations associated with individual state prevention measures. The backlog associated with the suspension of resettlement operations in 2020 have continued to impact refugees more than a year later despite key resettlement countries offering to increase the number of refugees resettled. The growing number of projected resettlement needs across Africa highlight the necessity for the expansion of third country resettlement beyond its current capacity. In addition, local integration supported by the CRRF and the Global Compact on Refugees, should be prioritized. Furthermore, implementation of Africa's first free trade area provides an opportunity for the international community to reimagine the *golden ticket* to the gold standard of local integration and resettlement within Africa. Encouragement and support from the international community could include additional funding to back initiatives aimed at refugee integration and free movement policies. Technical support in drafting refugee frameworks to assist refugees' access to local healthcare, education and employment would contribute to an environment conducive to local integration.

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