

# THE JOURNEY FROM HOPELESS TO HOPEFUL

BY TSHIBANDA GRACIA MUKIIBI

I am very privileged and blessed; I wish I could say this for every refugee whose life has been shattered and tormented by persecution and conflicts of all kinds. My name is Tshibanda Gracia Mukiibi and I'm a Congolese-born Australian freelance journalist, author, human rights advocate and UOW alumna.

My family and I fled the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2002 due to tribal and political conflicts. Coming from a family of 13 children, life was challenging. We had to pursue peace because our lives were in danger, leaving behind my four older sisters who were residing in a different city.

From Congo we went to South Africa, where we were refugees for three years. Even in South Africa, life had its own predicaments: living in a two-bedroom apartment 11 of us, nine children with mum and dad, with no source of income because my father was unemployed.

Fortunately, from South Africa my family was granted humanitarian visas to live in Australia. Soon after my arrival in Australia in July 2005, I started volunteering with Strategic Community Assistance to Refugee Families (SCARF) and a number of youth organisations. I was very passionate about making a difference in whatever way possible, particularly in the lives of refugee youth.

I often think about the people I came across through my work with SCARF; I

think about that woman, a single mother with eight children, whose husband disappeared without a trace, and she was forced to flee South Sudan to an unknown destination in pursuit of peace. I think of that child who, at the age of 12, had lost his parents and four siblings in the civil war in Sierra Leone. I also think about that family of five whose lives were cut short by explosive bombs in Syria. I then think of that father in Iraq who lost his 10-year-old daughter because she was persecuted over her family's religious affiliations. This is the norm for most refugees. It's unfortunate that innocent civilians are the ones paying the high price for war and conflict, and as time passes, the calamities escalate.

According to a recent report released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people worldwide has, for the first time in the post-World War II era, exceeded 50 million people. In 2013 an estimated 10.7 million individuals were

newly displaced due to conflict or persecution.

Across the world, thousands of people are displaced every day, and millions are living in hopeless situations, seeing their loved ones passing away or disappearing because they lack protection and the necessary support.

This highlights the imperative for wealthy nations like Australia, along with the entire international community, to address this matter. Humanity needs to regain its dignity. People are deprived of the most basic human rights: the right to life, and the right to liberty and security.

One of my role models is Paul Power, Chief Executive Officer of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), the national umbrella body for organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers.

Power graduated from UOW with a Master of Arts (Honours) in Journalism in 1994 and is a refugee advocate who is passionate to see change.



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Growing up in a culturally diverse neighbourhood in Sydney, the global refugee situation and the concept of multiculturalism captured Power's heart from a young age.

"The neighbourhood included many former refugees from Eastern Europe, Indochina, the Middle East and Latin America: people who valued Australia's freedom, worked hard and contributed much to Australian society," he said.

Power was raised in a nurturing environment by parents who valued volunteering, which led to him developing an interest in matters of social justice and social policy. Through meeting former refugees, Power's interest in Australian refugee policy grew, along with his concern about the national political debate about asylum.

"The political backlash against asylum seekers which began in the late 1990s shocked me. I couldn't accept that Australia would punish people seeking refuge in order to deter others trying to find safety from persecution. It challenged much of what I believed about my country," he said.

## THE GLOBAL REFUGEE SITUATION

My own experience of being both from a refugee background and working with refugee clients over the past several years, I can see that the situation is certainly deteriorating. We read about it, we see on television, in fact it's everywhere. The sad thing about it is the assistance provided to these individuals in need is very minimal and most receive no help.

"In 2013, resettlement was made available to just 98,426 refugees which is less than one per cent of the refugees under the UNHCR's mandate," Power said. If less than one per cent of the world refugee population is being resettled, I think about what would possibly happen to the remaining 99 per cent.

Figures from the UNHCR show that during 2013 conflict and persecution forced an average of 32,200 individuals per day to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere, either within the borders of their own country or in other countries. This compares to 23,400 in 2012 and 14,200 in 2011.

## AUSTRALIA'S RESPONSE

Australia is just one of the developed nations that has opened its doors to refugee resettlement. Thousands of refugees and asylum seekers over the past few decades have made Australia their home. This has significantly contributed to the multicultural Australia we are proud of today.

Particularly, the city of Wollongong has been enriched by the diversity of refugee arrivals. In 2002 Wollongong City Council signed up as a Welcome Zone for Humanitarian Refugees. Since then, many hundreds of refugees have become part of the multicultural fabric of Wollongong. Many organisations like SCARF have played a pivotal role in assisting refugee communities in their resettlement process in this great land.

Another of my role models is Sharyn Mackenzie, the founder of Strategic Community Assistance to Refugee Families (SCARF). She remembers meeting her first refugee family.

"At church, early in 2003, we met one of the first families to arrive, who were Southern Sudanese and had been in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya for more than 10 years. Their greatest need was help for their children with basic literacy and numeracy. We started visiting their home regularly to provide that support," Mackenzie said.

Through that family Sharyn and her husband, Kel Mackenzie, were able to meet all of the other families in the early intake of refugees. She identified clear gaps in what was being offered by government agencies, and this saw the birth of SCARF in 2005 with many volunteers jumping onboard to assist new refugees arriving in Wollongong.

As a former refugee myself, and despite the fact that I come from an educated family and spoke a little bit of English upon my arrival in Australia, coming to a new country was a very complex process, an exciting yet daunting experience. I've seen many other refugees doing it tough, and

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that's why I'm so grateful and thankful to organisations like SCARF who enabled many of us to have a smooth resettlement process.

I certainly acknowledge the government's assistance in providing the very basics for people to kick-start their lives in Australia with access to Centrelink benefits, health services, education and English classes among other services. However, the expectation from the government to settle within six months of one's arrival is certainly unrealistic and has been a challenge for many.

For me, when arriving in Australia everything was new and I experienced a number of difficulties. I struggled with the language, education system, the culture and more. SCARF certainly helped me to fill the gaps by assisting me with my homework and mentoring me to be the best that I could be.

"SCARF has provided some level of assistance to about 250 households and currently has 187 households registered as having access to its services. We do not restrict services or support [to a time limit] as community needs change... what is needed upon arrival is very different from the type of support needed at year six of settlement," Mackenzie said.



### CONTRIBUTIONS MADE BY REFUGEE ARRIVALS

"Receiving people from refugee backgrounds into Australia has many benefits, and not least of these is the opportunity for us, as a host nation, to demonstrate our capacity for compassion and generosity as world citizens... to demonstrate our humanity," Mackenzie added.

It is evident that the refugee community has brought a wonderful diversity of cultural heritage across Australia. Culturally and linguistically diverse communities have significantly contributed to our national prosperity in countless fields of the humanities and the sciences.

Former refugee Joseph Bol, Settlement and Training Coordinator with Navitas English, is using his experiences and UOW education to give back to his community in a range of positive ways.

Bol arrived in Australia in 2003 from South Sudan (then Sudan before separation or independence). He was granted humanitarian entrance due to the 25 years of Civil War that displaced millions of Sudanese people and resulted in countless deaths and human disruption.

Bol completed his studies at UOW with a Bachelor of Environmental Engineering in 2010 and Masters of Environmental Science in 2012 and is now a strong community figure and role model.

"I have been working with refugees from 2004 to the present day. Not only did I come to Australia as a refugee, but I also have a passion to assist people who have been made vulnerable by the occurrences in their home countries and are now settled in Australia," Bol said.

Widyan Al-Ubody is also a former refugee who fled Iraq, her country of birth, with her family due to persecution under Saddam Hussein's regime. Her family spent five years in Rafha refugee camp where living conditions were very poor with minimal food and water, and lack of employment.

Al-Ubody graduated from UOW in 2013 with a Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies and completed her Honours. Now an SBS broadcast journalist, published writer, media researcher, public speaker and community leader, she is making a significant difference in her community and the wider Australian society.

It's apparent that personal experiences play an important role when it comes to giving back to the community.

"My own experience is the reason I am now a refugee advocate, and the fact that 20 years on such appalling things are still happening. I feel like my experience is not finished until those experiences of others stop, and they will never stop so neither will I," Al-Ubody said.

### WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The global refugee situation is escalating, not due to the absence of love in the world, but due to greed, corruption and inept leadership. From my own personal experiences and observations, I can see that these are just a few of the causes. There's a lot of work still to be done, and I believe those who are in a better position can accommodate others.

"Well, Australia's current refugee intake is better than nothing compared to other countries. However, I believe Australia has a capacity to increase its intake to accommodate more refugees," Bol said.

"We have the space and can improve our infrastructure. We are a wealthy country and if Jordan can take over one million refugees and Jordan isn't wealthy like Australia—then there is no excuse for us not to do our part," Al-Ubody said.

This world would be a better place if only the international community was more compassionate toward the vulnerable and advocate for peace and unity across the world.

"Unfortunately we are also seeing wealthy nations increasingly adopt harsher asylum policies that deter, punish and expel people seeking a life free from persecution," Power said.

I'm concerned about where we are headed. Wealthy countries invest an enormous amount to secure its borders, and pay an awful amount of money to fight in wars, and yet not enough attention is paid to address the root of the problem.

"In my humble opinion and given that I work in the sector, I don't think the refugee situation in the world is getting any better. For example, the refugee situation in Syria and for internally displaced people in South Sudan is worse," Bol said.

"Things seem to be improving and then worsening. We have so many crises impacting refugees like malnutrition, illnesses and terrorism," Al-Ubody said.

"With all that bad there is good; there are so many dedicated volunteers and medics working with refugees using their skills and knowledge, and that restores my faith in humanity and makes me believe one day it will get better—I hope."

I ask myself, when will we see the day that the entire world is in total peace, where human beings cohabit with their counterparts despite their differences. I long to see the end of war and conflicts causing deaths, human disruption and suffering. I hope that at least generations after me will live to see this day. 🙏



## "My own experience is the reason I am now a refugee advocate..."



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