Understanding Vulnerability: From Categories to Experiences of Young Congolese People in Uganda

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This article problematises the 'vulnerables' category that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees applies to groups of refugees. Drawing on 9 months' qualitative research with young Congolese refugees in Uganda, it presents research subjects' self-identification and lived realities that do not correspond to the homogenous, fixed 'vulnerables' ideal. Moreover, it argues that the 'vulnerables' categorisation approach can provoke a number of counter-productive effects, including a focus on symptoms rather than causes, inflated numbers of 'vulnerables' and undermining indigenous support structures. An alternative approach that interrogates and addresses the contextual and relational aspects of vulnerability is proposed.
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Introduction

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), its implementing partners and the Government of Uganda (GoU) have adopted a categorisation approach to vulnerability among refugee populations living in Uganda. The 'vulnerables' category embodies circular logic, identifying groups of people who are perceived to be, by definition, vulnerable. Drawing on 9 months' qualitative research with young Congolese refugees in Uganda, this article interrogates the 'vulnerables' category by contextualising and historicising vulnerability and juxtaposing GoU and UNHCR approaches with research subjects' lived experiences. The research findings reveal that the fixed, essentialist categorical 'ideals' of 'vulnerables' do not reflect the more complex reality of dynamic vulnerability in shifting relationships and contexts. The article concludes with recommendations to promote greater understanding of, and hence more appropriate responses to, vulnerability.

Categorisation approach to vulnerability

Young refugee are routinely categorised on an implicit or explicit vulnerability scale (Boothby, 1996). UNHCR deems those under the age of 18 as 'the most vulnerable of a vulnerable population' (McNamara, 1998, p. 2). In turn, 'among refugee children, the most vulnerable are those who have been separated from their parents or usual guardian or care giver' (UNHCR, 1999, p. 95). These latter young people, designated as unaccompanied minors (UM), are grouped into a broader 'vulnerables' category, which also includes female-headed households, and the elderly, chronically ill and disabled.

While 'vulnerable' is an adjective, UNHCR and many other agencies working with refugees use it as a plural noun. This linguistic translation represents a conceptual and practical move towards essentialism: certain categories of people are perceived to be, by definition, vulnerable, which, in turn, is defined as being a member of these groups. The 'vulnerables' label designates groups of people assumed to share characteristics of physical weakness, emotional instability and economic dependence, explored in detail below. This essentialism is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it overlooks heterogeneity; assumed vulnerable characteristics do not necessarily hold true for all members of the categories at all times in all circumstances. Secondly, it implies a fixed state of being, thereby losing the contextual and relational aspects of vulnerability and hence conceptually ruling out a change of circumstances.

The sections below historicise and interrogate assumptions of physical weakness, economic dependence and psychological deficiency embodied in vulnerables discourse and categorisation by drawing on the lived experiences of young Congolese people in this study. The life story of one research subject, Rose, is reproduced in full here. (All names have been changed to preserve anonymity). This is not to suggest that this story is representative, although Rose shares some commonalities with other research subjects, who are young and have fled generalised insecurity in the DRC. Rather, Rose's narrative provides insight into the overlapping relationships and multiple subject positions (Mouffe, 1993, p. 77) in which she is embedded and thus serves to highlight the relational and contextual nature of vulnerability.

Rose is a 16-year-old woman from Bukavu, South Kivu, DRC, who self-identifies as 'Munyamulenge'. This term is used to describe Rwanda-speaking Tutsi who live in the DRC. When she was 13, she and her family fled violence in Bukavu to Gatumba refugee camp, Burundi. There, her parents and siblings were killed in the August 2004 massacre. Rose escaped and fled to Cyangugu, Rwanda, where her elder brother was living in a refugee camp. Rose stayed in Cyangugu briefly, but found life difficult, so moved to Kampala.

When she arrived in Kampala, Rose met a Congolese pastor at a protestant church who offered her accommodation with his family in return for domestic tasks. Another Congolese man, Jean-Pierre saw Rose working in the pastor's home and, recognising that she was a hard worker, asked her to become an apprentice in his hairdressing salon. Jean-Pierre negotiated with the pastor, who agreed to the arrangement. But, Rose knew that she could only work in the salon for as long as the pastor allowed her to do so. Rose was not paid for her labour in the salon, but, on good days, Jean-Pierre would give her lunch and Rose hoped her apprenticeship would lead to employment once she was fully trained. As Rose developed more complex skills, Jean-Pierre would leave her for lengthy periods of time to serve clients on her own. Rose worked long days, completing her domestic tasks at home before opening the salon and assisting Jean-Pierre all day, returning in the evening to cook for the family.

Rose became increasingly concerned about the pastor, who came home drunk and made sexual advances towards her. She had managed to avoid them, but because they all slept in one room, she was afraid. Rose had a series of interviews with a UNHCR protection officer. Her refugee status was delayed because UNHCR could not find her file from Gatumba, where Rose was listed as a dependent on her father's refugee claim. Rose had only a temporary identity card and received no assistance while she waited for her case to be settled.

In December 2004, Rose was given 2 weeks' notice to leave the Congolese pastor's house. Eventually, Jean-Pierre offered her a place to live with his family. Rose helped Jean-Pierre's

wife, Anne, with domestic tasks and continued to work at the salon. Rose was uncomfortable with this new living arrangement. She was happy at Jean-Pierre's house and liked Anne, but was worried that she was financial burden for them.

In January 2005, Rose decided to return to the DRC. Rose was afraid of being asked to leave Jean-Pierre's house and saw no future for herself in Uganda. She wanted to leave while she was still on friendly terms with Anne and Jean-Pierre, whom she considered to be 'like my brother or my father'. Rose hoped that, in the DRC, she would be able to find her grandmother, whom she believed was still living in Mulenge, although this was unconfirmed. Rose knew that the road from Bukavu to Mulenge was unsafe, but she felt that she had no choice, as life was not moving ahead in Kampala. Jean-Pierre thought Rose's decision to return to the DRC was suicidal and refused to give her transport money. As Rose received no monetary compensation for her labour at home and in the salon, she was unable to leave.

In August 2005 Jean-Pierre was asked to leave the salon. He said that Rose had betrayed him by telling the salon owner, a Munyamulenge, that she would work for much less than Jean-Pierre. He also accused Rose of spreading lies about him and of stealing salon equipment. Jean-Pierre says because of financial problems resulting from his loss of unemployment, that Anne left him and returned to her mother in Rwanda.

According to Rose, problems in Jean-Pierre's relationship with Anne predated Jean-Pierre's dismissal from the salon, when Anne started accusing Rose of trying to steal Jean-Pierre. Jean-Pierre told Anne to go to her mother in Rwanda and asked Rose to leave the house and the salon. But, later he had problems with the salon owner, who asked him to leave. The salon owner then hired Rose, who received a salary of approximately US$20 per month. In the absence of a head hairdresser in the salon, Rose tried to serve clients as best she can.

Rose moved in with another Munyamulenge woman, Bernice and her two children in Zzana on the outskirts of Kampala. There are many other Banyamulenge in the neighbourhood, and Rose has started attending a church there, where she can pray in her own language. Rose contributes two-thirds of her salary to rent and spends the rest of her earnings on food.

In December 2005 Rose still had not received refugee status or permanent identification. The salon owner was threatening to sell the salon. Rose had difficulties finding transport money for the long daily commute to the centre of town to work each day. She hoped she would be able to find work in a salon closer to home. She had thought about setting up her own salon, but lacked capital to do so.

Rose's experiences illustrate the dynamic nature of vulnerability as her relationships and circumstances changed. In contrast to the categorisation approach which attributes fixed, essentialist traits to 'vulnerables', I argue that researchers, practitioners and policy-makers need to analyse particular relationships and contexts to adequately understand and address vulnerability.

Methodology and terminology

The data presented in this article are thus based on a methodological approach that privileged investment in relationships. Nine months' research with Congolese, Ugandans and GoU

and UNHCR officials was conducted over a 15-month period (September 2004 to December 2005). Two research sites were selected: Kampala, a large urban centre where most of the research participants live informally or illegally, and Kyaka II, an isolated rural refugee settlement where refugees are documented, controlled and assisted. Both research sites were visited twice to gain longer term data in dynamic circumstances, both into the lives of individual research subjects and broader socio-political contexts.

Data were gathered using a variety of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, oral history and individual writing exercises. Snowball and purposive sampling were used to identify 400 research subjects, of whom approximately 50 young people became key research subjects. In-depth research could be conducted only with research subjects who spoke some French or English, and thus had a certain level of formal education. Despite these limitations, efforts were made to diversify the sample to include people of different age, ethnicity, sex, and class, and living in different circumstances in the two research sites. Nevertheless, representivity and generalisability of findings should not necessarily be assumed.

In this study, 'children' refers to individuals who have not reached puberty and 'young people' are individuals who have passed puberty, but who have not yet married. These are social definitions that emerged from the majority of research subjects' experiences and views on childhood, youth, adulthood and old age in their changing social contexts. Such a perspective differs from many prevailing chronological definitions of children and young people that are codified in international law and are the basis of programmatic interventions by many international organisations working in refugee contexts. 'Social age' refers to the social meanings ascribed to biological development, chronological age, relative age and generation. In this sense, I distinguish social from physical or chronological age in a similar way to gender and sex.

The term 'refugee' is used to describe the circumstances of people who have come to Uganda in the context of generalised conflict and insecurity in the DRC. It therefore applies not only to those who have been legally recognised as refugees by GoU and/or UNHCR, but also to those who self-identify as refugees but have not registered as such for legal, practical or social reasons. In keeping with many of my research subjects' self-definition, I prefer to use the term 'Congolese' rather than 'refugee' to describe them.

Problematising essentialist 'vulnerables' traits

As argued above, the 'vulnerables' category is based on assumptions that 'vulnerables' inherently embody fixed traits of physical weakness, economic dependence and psychosocial trauma. However, my research findings show that these assumptions do not hold true for all people categorised as 'vulnerable' in all circumstances at all times. Rather, research subjects are vulnerable to particular problems in specific contexts and relationships.

Physical weakness

Vulnerability was initially constructed as a category for priority food aid in the context of humanitarian emergencies (Davis, 1996; Jaspars and Shoham, 1999). Vulnerability to nutri-

tional deficiency and/or starvation determined eligibility for supplemental feeding in contexts of limited resources (Davis, 1996; Korf, 2004). Critiques of attributing disasters largely to physical causes and hence approaching vulnerability primarily in a technocratic manner led to contextualisation of disaster within social, political and economic realities, particularly in complex emergencies (Jaspars and Shoham, 1999; Keen, 1994; de Waal, 2005). Some have further suggested that the discursive framework within which vulnerability is conceptualised needs to be analysed in terms of its historical roots and bias towards minority-world values and norms (Bankoff, 2001).

While initially grounded in realities of nutritional needs, the 'vulnerables' category has now been extrapolated and applied in very different contexts, where physical weakness is believed to be an inherent characteristic of 'vulnerables'. For example, when receiving new arrivals, the UNHCR community services supervisor in Kyaka II identifies 'vulnerables' primarily through appearance ('you can see it'), and then interviews. In both Kyaka II and Kampala, the physical weakness of women and girls is most commonly given as a reason why they are vulnerable, particularly to sexual abuse and exploitation. In contrast, single men aged 18 and above are at the bottom of the vulnerability priority list, because they are perceived to be strong.

However, most young Congolese people in my study, including those categorised as vulnerable, do not self-identify as being physically weak. Indeed, in contrast to this categorisation, some feel they are strong because they are 'still young'. Annette self-identifies as a young person, which she defines as 'someone who is strong, who is capable of doing everything'. Those who do consider themselves to be weak apply this description to themselves as individuals because they are ill or physically small. For example, Emmanuel, who is very small for his age, said, 'I don't have [power] because I have a disease. If I exercise too much, I have pain'. He was later transferred to Kampala for 3 months for extensive medical treatment.

Others view physical vulnerability as relational and contextual, rather than a fixed given. For example, Ange described her circumstances in Kyaka II: 'Here?' She laughed and then continued, 'I don't have the strength to farm. I'm a girl'. In this case, Ange explicitly links her lack of physical strength as a 'girl' to the geographic context of Kyaka II ('Here?'), where refugees have to farm to survive. Many young women also speak of the contextual and relational nature of vulnerability to sexual harassment. In Kyaka II, girls and young women do not like to walk in remote areas alone. Some have been impregnated in primary school and many are married at a young age. 'In the forest, there are very many boys and youth who even in the Congo didn't study. They want to marry, so they take very young girls'. In Kampala, 'Here, when you go out to get things, Ugandan boys want to rape you'. The repetition of specific places ('here'; 'in the forest') shows the contextual nature of physical vulnerability.

Moreover, the significance of being physically weak or biologically female is relational: how people who are physically stronger interact with those who are, or are perceived to be, physically weaker (De Berry, 2004, p. 47; Stetz, 2003). Rose's experience of sexual harassment in the pastor's home provides a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability in asymmetrical power relations. In this context, Rose was vulnerable to rape not simply because she was female, but more importantly because the pastor was a religious and community leader and head of the family who was providing her shelter. This meant that Rose had less opportunity to negotiate a non-sexual relationship with him.

Economic dependence

A second trait attributed to 'vulnerables' is economic dependence: as refugees and young people, my research subjects are assumed to be doubly dependent and hence especially vulnerable. For example, the headteacher at the UNHCR-supported secondary school in Kyaka II identifies vulnerable students for scholarships: 'On the whole, almost all refugees are vulnerable. Those without parents are more vulnerable'.

The assumption of refugees' inherent economic deprivation should be contextualised in an international aid regime that uses vulnerability as an indicator of the recipients' worthiness:

> Unlike the exchange of gifts, charity as an idea entails giving with 'no strings attached'; yet, in the context of humanitarian aid practices, charity becomes redefined. It implies giving to a deserving or worthy recipient, being fully aware that such an act can never be reciprocated through material means. An interesting paradox thus arises. The donor borrows from the idea of charity the concept of non-reciprocation or, better, not necessary reciprocation, and, in turn uses it in order to impose a condition on the donations: desert or merit which is construed in terms of absolute destitution on the part of the recipient (Harrell-Bond and others, 1992, p. 207).

However, this assumed destitution does not reflect all refugees' realities. For example, Bagama arrived in Kyaka II with many belongings, which caused problems with GoU officials: 'This gave them a complex'. He was granted refugee status only after showing them his wound from the war in Ituri. As Peter argues, 'It isn't a contradiction for a refugee to be rich, but the camp administration doesn't see it like that'. Moreover, the GoU's self-reliance strategy (SRS), upheld by UNHCR, is inconsistent with the view of economically dependent refugees. Refugees in Kampala are permitted to stay only if they prove 'self-sufficiency', while those in Kyaka II must engage in subsistence farming as their rations are gradually reduced. These policies apply to everyone, including 'vulnerables' and people who are economically vulnerable because they cannot farm due to illness or injury. As Tolérance noted,

> Those people there [in the refugee offices] have no pity for refugees. Even when I came here, I was in very bad condition. They gave me the forest and told me to farm. If I hadn't found the family I am staying with, I don't know what would have happened.

Research subjects' economic vulnerability is thus relational and contextual. In Kampala, refugees face economic discrimination because of their socio political position as outsiders. Some refer to the Ugandan culture to charge more to foreigners, including Congolese, for goods and services. Others highlight the difficulty of obtaining jobs in either the formal or informal economy because of language difficulties, lack of appropriate education or discrimination. Those who do find jobs are sometimes exploited, with limited access to legal redress. For example, when Sara first arrived in Kampala, some Ugandans hired her in their boutique. At the end of the month, they refused to pay her, saying that she had eaten their food and slept in their shop. Some young man work long hours in Internet cafes for minimal pay that does not even cover their transportation and meal costs.

In terms of inter-generational dynamics, many Congolese families view young people as assets to collective livelihood (Ungar, 2005). Young people may play a variety of primarily domestic and reproductive roles to free up adults for productive labour outside of the

home (Boyden and others, 1998; Nieuwenhuys, 1994). In refugee contexts, some young people's roles increase because of the relatively more limited economic opportunities available to adults and hence their prolonged absence from domestic reproductive activities. Research subjects from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, for example, identify increased work as a difference between life in Uganda and the DRC. This corresponds to Mann's (2003, p. 27) study with Congolese children and young people in Dar es Salaam. Young people like Rose, who live in informal fostering arrangements implicitly or explicitly based on resource exchange, also undertake a variety of economic roles in households.

The imputed economic dependence and vulnerability of refugee young people thus denies the contribution that they make to households and communities. Because their labour tends to be unremunerated or poorly paid, it is at best undervalued and at worst ignored altogether (Woodhead, 1998):

> The reasons children are more likely than adults to be allotted unpaid work in agriculture or the household can be gauged by the work of feminist researchers that highlights how ideologies of gender and age interact to constrain, in particular, girls to perform unpaid domestic work. • [S]eniority explains why children's work is largely valued as inferior: Inferiority is not only attached to the nature of the work but to the person who performs it as well. Poor children are not perceived as workers because what they do is submerged in the low status realm of the domestic. (Nieuwenhuys, 1996, p. 243)

Adults depend on children and young people (Tolfree, 2004) to undertake a variety of tasks related primarily to (re)production (Boyden and others, 1998; Nieuwenhuys, 1996). However, because this labour is unremunerated, they rely on adults for goods and services requiring cash, which constrains decision-making. For example, Rose was unable to implement her decision to return to the DRC in early 2005 because she was not remunerated for her work at the salon and the pastor's house and hence did not have money for transportation to Bukavu. When she asked Jean-Pierre for assistance, he refused because he disagreed with her decision to leave Uganda. Rose was economically vulnerable in this situation — even though she had contributed to collective livelihood in the pastor's and Jean-Pierre's households — because her contribution was unrecognised (even by Rose, who perceived herself to be financial burden), undervalued and unremunerated. In contrast, Rose's relationship with Bernice is qualitatively different because her labour at the salon is remunerated and hence she contributes monetarily to Bernice's household. Rose's experiences highlight the need to analyse interdependent relationships in families (Baker, 1998), households and communities to better understand economic vulnerability in particular contexts and relationships, rather than assuming that young refugee people are by definition inherently economically dependent.

'Trauma': mental and emotional deficiency

The assumed emotional incapacity of refugees in general, and young refugee people in particular, is another stated reason for their perceived vulnerability. A large body of psychological literature attempts to interpret and explain the assumed detrimental psychological effects of displacement on children and young people (for example, Athey and Ahearn, 1991; Burlingham and Freud, 1942; Eisenbruch, 1988; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1996). This scholarship has been critiqued for many reasons. Firstly, it focuses on vulnerability through its analysis of risk factors: 'variables that increase individuals' likelihood of psychopathology

or their susceptibility to negative developmental outcomes' (Boyden and Mann, 2005, p. 6). Therefore, maladaptive or 'deviant' behaviour tends to be at the centre of the analysis, and hence could bias results (Luthar and others, 2000). Secondly, critics suggest that western clinical approaches overlook culturally specific responses to distress, such as collective coping strategies (Bracken, 2002; Bracken and others, 1995). Thirdly, scholars have challenged the 'sedentarist analytical bias', which assumes that one's homeland is one's normal and ideal habitat (Lumsden, 1999; Malkki, 1995). For these reasons, medical illness models may pathologise normal reactions to conflict and migration (Kos and Derviskadic-Jovanovic, 1998; Summerfield, 2000).

Some recent scholarship has thus shifted the focus to successful adaptation to adversity (for example, Boothby, 1996; Luthar, 1991; Ungar, 2005), promoting increased awareness of resilience: 'a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' (Luthar and others, 2000, p. 543). Several studies have revealed young refugee people's creative coping strategies and positive development in the face of adversity (for example, Kos and Derviskadic-Jovanovic, 1998; Raven-Roberts and Dick, 1997). Internal critiques have encouraged a further move from such ecological approaches, to constructionist ones that 'account for cultural and contextual differences in how resilience is expressed by individuals, families, and communities' (Ungar, 2004, p. 342).

While resilience studies have challenged assumptions of inherent mental health problems among refugee populations, UNHCR still adopts this approach in policy documents: 'Life as a refugee is a life of trauma for children' (UNHCR, 1999, p. 94). Some field staff in this study also subscribe to the idea that young refugee people are 'psychologically at great risk from the trauma inherent in situations which cause uprooting, and from the uprooting itself' (UNHCR, 1993, p. 2). For example, the director of studies at Bujabuli Secondary School explained the challenges of working with refugee students: 'Some of these children are traumatised. The teachers need to learn how to deal with them'.

In contrast, young refugee people rarely mention trauma as a defining feature of their lives. Rather, loss and despair are portrayed in relational terms, with emphasis on being alone. Luc self-identifies as vulnerable 'because I don't have any family. I am alone'. Similarly, Nyota feels insecure because 'I am by myself here'. Mathieu believes young refugee people are vulnerable 'because we are not used to the life here. We are in a foreign place, so we need protection'. These aspects are relational (being alone) and contextual (in a foreign place) rather than fixed.

For Rose, lack of kinship networks, contested Congolese citizenship as Munyamulenge and difficulty in obtaining refugee status in Uganda contributed to her isolation. However, Christianity and her church communities provided a sense of belonging. The only break she had from her domestic and salon work was regular attendance at an all-night Pentecostal church service on Fridays and singing in the choir at a Congolese church on Sunday mornings. The few friends that Rose made in Kampala were from these churches. In response to the crisis points outlined in her story above, Rose referred to her faith. For example, when confronted with the dangers of returning to the DRC, Rose said, 'If God wants me to die, let me die there'. However, while social structures helped Rose to cope with her difficult circumstances, power relationships embedded in them also entailed vulnerabilities, when the pastor abused his leadership position. Whether such social structures become sources of vulnerability or resilience thus depend on particular relationships and circumstances.

Perverse effects of vulnerables categorisation

The analysis above suggests that, by transforming the adjective 'vulnerable' into the noun 'vulnerables', UNHCR and GoU have created a category of people with assumed fixed physical, economic and psychosocial characteristics. However, the relational and contextual aspects of 'vulnerability to • ' have been lost in this translation, resulting in a number of counter-productive effects.

Firstly, the essentialism embodied in the vulnerables categorisation conceptually rules out the possibility of a change in circumstances. Because vulnerables are assumed to be by definition vulnerable, little attention is paid to why specific contexts and relationships render people vulnerable. As a result, root causes of vulnerability are not identified and addressed. Instead, efforts are concentrated on responding to assumed symptoms of vulnerables: physical weakness, economic dependence and trauma.

Secondly, applying the fixed 'vulnerables' label in isolation from the environments in which people live (Jaspars and Shoham, 1999) decontextualises experiences and hence limits understanding of vulnerability:

> [I]n this separation of an individual's needs from their context, and the process of reconstruction into a programmatic identity, there is created the important distinction between 'case' and 'story'. Delinkage takes place whereby an individual identity is replaced by a stereotyped identity with a categorical prescription of assumed needs. These categories are usually absolute not relative or comparative. Labels replicate the professional, bureaucratic and political values which create them; but a story is thus reformed into a case, a category (Zetter, 1991, p. 44).

In contrast, Congolese leaders who work with children and young people adopt a more nuanced approach to vulnerability. Siaka argues, '"Vulnerability" is only a label that takes away their opportunities. The problem is not young people who are vulnerable, but the situation that makes them naive'. Similarly, Pharaoh describes the importance of contextual and relational analysis when selecting 'vulnerable children' for support in community-based initiatives in Kasese:

> When we see that a child is vulnerable, we try to see how we can help this child. We try to find someone in the community to take care of this child. We also consult individuals, make them see the problems of children and help them to help children. We have strategies to see who needs help. For example, not all orphans are vulnerable. We need to choose who to help.

A third problem with the categorisation approach to vulnerability is that it encourages refugees to engage in 'victimcy': 'expressing their individual agency by representing themselves as powerless victims' (Utas, 2004, p. 209). Many research subjects self-identify as 'vulnerable', even if they do not believe themselves to be vulnerable or fulfil 'vulnerables' criteria. During the first period of research in Kyaka II, many children and young people introduced themselves as 'orphans' or UM, although some had parents. This attempt to fit into conceptual categories was particularly explicit during my first interview with Augustin, who immediately self-identified as vulnerable 'because my needs are not met'. When probed about what this meant, he looked up the word 'vulnerable' in the dictionary and continued, 'I am not a minor in terms of age, but I am a minor intellectually'. However, in the same interview, Augustin self-identified as an 'intellectual' to distinguish himself from other refugees coming from rural areas.

'Victimcy' results in inflated numbers of 'vulnerables'. During a verification exercise in Kyaka II, UNHCR and GoU discovered that many young people who had self-identified as UM were actually living with a parent or guardian. The camp commandant concluded, 'These are the games people play'. However, Siaka argues,

> Young people are not vulnerable, but they play the system because they are obliged to do so. I am a refugee, so I must play the game as refugees are expected to. I must act weak and humble.

While vulnerability can be politically useful to young people through 'victimcy', it also contributes to pathologising approaches that neglect young people's agency (Kitzinger, 1997).

> The use of superior power positions in order to promote notions of security or justice for 'the weak' always runs the risk of shifting over into relations of patronage or oppression • To what extent may vulnerable people have been objectified and homogenised, characterised on the basis of some index of their 'neediness', without any real respect or understanding being shown towards the specificity of their situation? To what degree have their preferences and aspirations set the agenda for any action undertaken on their behalf, and how may (or may not) this action enable them to progress beyond their current positions of relative vulnerability? Are there opportunities for them to challenge or renegotiate the extent of their need for protection? (Tew, 2002, p. 165)

Moreover, it reduces incentives to recognise and promote their own coping strategies and may undermine existing social networks and support structures (Jaspars and Shoham, 1999).

Towards an alternative approach

In contrast to a categorisation approach to 'vulnerables' with perceived fixed economic, physical and psychological characteristics, this article argues for greater analysis of complex and nuanced realities of vulnerability processes. Although research subjects face some similar structural constraints, their experiences, as refugees and young people, are diverse. Some commonalities do not merit over-exaggeration of homogenous 'vulnerables'. Research data and analysis highlight an overall problem with fixed categorical approaches to 'vulnerables': the abstraction of essentialised characteristics, which are then applied in very different contexts and relationships (Asad, 2004, p. 283).

Instead of projecting these pre conceived categories onto populations, researchers, policy-makers and programmatic agencies need to better understand what vulnerability actually means to people in varying contexts and relationships. This requires sustained presence on the ground with populations and investments of time, energy and resources in vulnerability assessment and responses. Similarly, attention should be focused on identifying and assessing power structures in contexts of vulnerability. These patterns of relationships affect the significance of certain traits (for example, being physically weak) and circumstances (for example, being without one's family). The contextual and relational significance of these traits is demonstrated by Rose's varied experiences as a young single female refugee in Kampala. Although her personal characteristics did not change, she faced varying degrees of vulnerability to sexual assault and economic exploitation as she moved between household networks with the pastor, Jean-Pierre and Bernice. Posing the question 'Vulnerability to what?' will thus provoke an analysis of power structures and hence greater understanding of root causes of, and appropriate responses to, vulnerability than the categorical 'vulnerables' approach.

Finally, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners must be aware of the extent to which outside interventions can impact on self-perceptions of, and reactions to, vulnerability. As discussed above, 'vulnerables' labelling can result in 'victimcy' and undermine local coping strategies. The alternative approach to vulnerability advocated in this article stresses the importance of recognising and building on existing understanding of, and approaches to, vulnerability in local communities.

Acknowledgement

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