



# “Wakimbizi, wakimbizi”: Congolese refugee boys’ and girls’ perspectives on life in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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1. [www.refugees.org/  
world/countryrpt/africa/  
tanzania.htm](http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/africa/tanzania.htm)

**SUMMARY:** *This paper draws on interviews and discussions with 40 Congolese refugee boys and girls who live in Dar es Salaam. It describes their lives and the difficulties they face, and discusses the implications of their clandestine existence (since refugees are not meant to live in Dar but to stay in refugee camps). Children have to conceal their identities and often have their mobility restricted by parents for fear that they will be identified as refugees. Children talk about the harassment they suffer and how they learn to distrust all strangers. Many parents do not send their children to school because they feel their time in Dar is temporary. Most children still think of Congo as home and have little hope that things will improve if they stay in Dar es Salaam. The paper discusses the need to recognize the rights of the “hidden” refugees, who are common and often numerous in many African cities.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING TO GOVERNMENT and UNHCR statistics, Tanzania is currently host to approximately 1 million refugees.<sup>(1)</sup> The large majority of these displaced people have fled the ongoing civil conflicts in Burundi and Congo (DRC) and, to a lesser extent, Rwanda and Somalia. Whilst Tanzanian government policy currently requires all refugees to live in camps or settlements, a very small number of people are granted permission to live in Dar es Salaam, a city of approximately 3 million on the Indian Ocean coast. Permits to live in the city are usually granted on a short-term basis, as a result of educational, medical or security needs. In part to contain the refugee population on the western side of the country, and to discourage refugees from settling in the city, the Tanzanian Ministry of Home Affairs does not grant refugees the right to work, except in very exceptional circumstances. Whilst some individuals and families with permits are given financial assistance from UNHCR, the large majority of refugees in Dar es Salaam are left to fend for themselves in an environment where tolerance and generosity towards “foreigners” has diminished in recent years. Once world-renowned for their compassionate acceptance of refugees (and still impressive by most standards), the people of Tanzania have grown weary of the nearly continuous influx of people from the Great Lakes region over the past 30 years.

As a result of this and other policies, Tanzania has been largely successful in containing its refugee population in the western border

regions. However, given the magnitude of their numbers, it is difficult for the government to monitor the movements of refugees once they enter Tanzania. Because it is seen to offer improved opportunities for security, employment, education and personal freedom, many refugees choose to go to Dar es Salaam to live illegally. Some come directly from their home country, without passing through the official registration procedures. Others leave the refugee camps and make their way to the city, where they may hope to connect with family or friends, or continue on a longer journey to other destinations such as South Africa. Still others come with permission to remain for a specified period, but choose to stay after their permit has expired and live clandestinely. The majority of these urban refugees appear to be men aged between 25 and 40. However, there are significant numbers of single- and two-parent families who migrate to the city, as well as women who come alone and children who come without adults. Most of these "separated" children are boys over the age of 13, but there are also adolescent girls among this population. The greater visibility of separated boys may reflect the social construction of gender roles in the cultures of the region, where girls are more likely than boys to remain in the private, domestic sphere. In this way, involvement in activities like the sex trade or domestic service may render girls less visible, and therefore create the impression that there are fewer of them among the population of separated refugee children in the city.<sup>(2)</sup>

I have spent the last eight months getting to know many of the families and separated children who have come to Dar es Salaam as refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). During this time, through opportunistic and snowball sampling, I have come into contact with more than 150 adults and children, and have worked closely with approximately 40 boys and girls. Some of these families have permission to live in the city whilst others do not. Regardless of their legal status, many families live in fear of the Tanzanian authorities, Tanzanian citizens and, in some cases, other refugees. As a result, the population of refugees in Dar es Salaam is dispersed throughout the city and many keep their national identity concealed. Some live as "Tanzanians", telling others that they come from Kigoma, a district of Tanzania that borders DRC and Burundi. Others simply restrict their interactions with strangers as much as possible. The fact that Tanzania does not require its residents to carry identification cards, as is common in other countries of the region, means that the true nature of people's citizenship can remain largely hidden. Nevertheless, despite these factors, at least several times a year there are police round-ups of refugees without permits, and those apprehended are sent to prison (usually temporarily) or to the camps.

The clandestine and often illegal nature of their urban existence means that the needs and experiences of Congolese refugees in Dar es Salaam have, to date, been largely invisible to government, NGOs and researchers. Through participant observation with refugee children and families, and a number of child-focused participatory research methods, I have learned about the joys and challenges of children's lives and about the often very difficult circumstances in which they live, largely as outsiders, in the sprawling hot and humid suburbs of Tanzania's biggest city. In so doing, I have come to appreciate what boys and girls see as the consequences of being a refugee in Dar es Salaam.<sup>(3)</sup>

2. Mann, Gillian (2001), *Networks of Support: A Literature Review of Care Issues for Separated Children*, Save the Children, Stockholm, Sweden.

3. Careful attention has to be paid to the real and perceived threats to the security of refugees in this context. In carrying out my research and in writing this article, I have deliberately chosen to withhold information that might jeopardize the situation of the families and children that I know in Dar es Salaam. Ironically, people consenting to being involved in the research is principally a result of their desire to inform the rest of the world of their situation.

## II. CHILDREN'S DIFFERING CIRCUMSTANCES

CONGOLESE REFUGEE BOYS and girls in Dar es Salaam are not homogeneous in terms of their living arrangements or their length of stay in Tanzania. Some children live on their own or with siblings in either single- or two-parent households. Others live with extended family members, notably grandparent(s), parents' siblings or adult brothers and sisters. Others, still, stay with unrelated Congolese families, either as the family's "own" child or as a domestic worker or temporary visitor. In a few rare cases, a child may live with a Tanzanian family, an arrangement that usually results from a long-standing friendship with the child's deceased or absent parents. Sometimes, these latter two arrangements were made in DRC and the orphaned or separated child in this context has entered Tanzania in the company of, or assisted by, these parties. At other times, those Congolese refugee boys and girls who come to the city illegally and without adult accompaniment may seek out a past neighbour or distant relative whom they know to be living in Dar es Salaam. Others may approach concerned Congolese adults, often a minister or congregants of a local Pentecostal church, to feed and house them out of sympathy or in exchange for child care or domestic service.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that some separated boys and girls in Dar es Salaam live as street children (boys) and others as sex workers (girls).<sup>(4)</sup> In general, the vast majority of these children never disclose their refugee identity, in order to benefit from the services of Tanzanian child-serving NGOs and to avoid being sent to the refugee camps.<sup>(5)</sup> Others go underground, disconnecting themselves entirely from their war-affected past, sleeping on their own or with their Tanzanian peers in hostels or in the courtyard of a sympathetic businessperson or individual. Given the largely illegal nature of this population, I have had only minimal contact with boys and girls in these circumstances, largely because of the difficulties in locating them and ethical concerns about the emotional, social, economic and political price they might pay for their participation in the research. To date, the size of this population is not known.

The Congolese refugee children I have encountered in Dar es Salaam have lived in the city for varying lengths of time. Some came as long ago as the early 1990s, when their parents fled Mobutu's Zaire for political reasons. The great majority, however, have come since 1996, most often as a result of the conflicts in the Kivu area (eastern DRC) associated with Laurent Kabila's rise to power. Some of these children were born in Tanzania, although they are nonetheless considered refugees: the Tanzanian government classifies a child born to refugee parents as a refugee as well, even if the child was born in-country. For those children who come to Tanzania with memories of the Congo, the landscape, their home, their friends and their families, these recollections serve as a basis upon which to compare and judge the condition of their lives in Dar es Salaam. As is common for many children of refugees born abroad, children of Congolese refugees born in Tanzania are firmly grounded in their Congolese identity, and are taught from a young age to see Tanzania as a foreign place and their life there as one of exile.<sup>(6)</sup> When asked to draw "home", many of the children whom I know depict the imagined homeland of the DRC. A number of these boys and girls have never been outside Dar es Salaam, yet their drawings contain pictures of Lake Kivu or what they imagine to be the flora and fauna of eastern DRC. Despite

4. Interview 1DAR02, 2DAR02, 3DAR01, 4DAR01, 5DAR02, 6DAR01.

5. Tanzanian and international NGOs are obliged to inform UNHCR and/or the government of Tanzania in the event that they come into contact with a separated refugee child.

6. See, for example, Hart, Jason (2002), "Children and nationalism in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan", *Childhood* Vol 9, No 1, pages 35–47, with reference to the experience of Palestinian refugee children in Jordan.

their length of residence in Tanzania, Congo is still “home” for many Congolese refugee children, even for those who have never been there. Few see their stay in Tanzania as permanent; nearly all speak of “returning” when peace has been restored to “their country”.

Despite the importance of “home” and of being Congolese, many of the Congolese children who were born in Tanzania or are too young to remember their lives in DRC are often not told of their refugee status until they have reached the age of six or seven. Parents consciously withhold this information in an effort to protect their child from harassment, but also to avoid the consequences of a young child’s unintentional disclosure. Once the child has reached “the age of understanding”, he or she will be told the truth about the family’s status and admonished not to reveal their true identity to anyone. Interestingly, whilst most of the parents I know say that they made a conscious choice to tell their child once they felt the child was old enough to understand the implications of the information, many boys and girls tell me that they have always known that they were Congolese, that they did not belong and that they should not confide this fact to others. Among the many ways in which they came to understand their situation was the realization that their parents did not speak “*le vrai Swahili*”.<sup>7</sup> Most say they knew the reality of their identity long before their parents intentionally chose to share this information with them.

7. The KiSwahili spoken in Tanzania uses anglicized words for items such as driver (*dereva*), whereas the KiSwahili of the eastern DRC relies on French for similar purposes (*chauffeur/chauffa*).

### III. THE ISSUES ACCORDING TO CONGOLESE CHILDREN

IN GENERAL, CONGOLESE refugee children in Dar es Salaam see themselves as extremely disadvantaged relative to Tanzanian girls and boys. Whilst poverty and social exclusion affect many Tanzanian children, these social ills, coupled with the need to conceal one’s true identity, are a reality for nearly all refugee children in Tanzania, regardless of their national origin. These problems are particularly acute for children who live as “guests” in the homes of extended and unrelated families. For refugee children in this context, there is often no one to turn to for emotional and material assistance, aside from their guardian(s), whose own biological children are usually treated more favourably and accorded the lion’s share of scarce family resources. These boys and girls can rarely reveal to other children (and especially adults) the fact that they are not Tanzanian, let alone that they are refugees and that the people they live with may be treating them poorly or abusively. The child protection implications of such situations are significant.

Congolese refugee boys and girls in Dar es Salaam suffer from material deprivation and lack of access to basic social services such as health care and education. When young children are asked what life is like in the city, many answer, “...we are always hungry...” or “...our parents are always sick...” The majority of families eat only once, or sometimes twice, a day. Most of the children I know suffer from intestinal parasites and varying levels of malnutrition. Health care is often prohibitively expensive and many refugee parents say that they cannot access care without bribing service providers (many Tanzanians make the same claim). In terms of education, for those children who do go to school, enrolment is often interrupted because of fluctuating family finances. These interruptions make academic progress difficult and further reduce children’s already limited opportunities to develop friendships and extend their networks of

support. Some children do not go to school at all because the costs – direct or opportunity – are considered to be too great. Moreover, there may also be perceived social costs of attending school, as parents sometimes fear that their child will betray the family's refugee identity to teachers or principals who, in turn, may report them to the authorities or use the knowledge for blackmail. Also, some parents choose not to send their children to school because they see the family's residence in Dar es Salaam as being temporary or because they believe their child should be educated in French, according to the Congolese national curriculum.

Those children who do not attend school tend to spend their days engaged in a variety of domestic and income-generating activities. There appears to be a marked division in the activities of boys and girls in this context, although the allocation of responsibilities depends to a large extent on the birth order of the child and the number of children in the household. In general, from the age of six or seven, girls take on increasing levels of responsibility for child care, cooking, cleaning, collecting water and other household chores such as caring for an elderly grandparent. By the age of 11 or 12, a girl may be almost exclusively responsible for these tasks, especially if she is the eldest female child and her parent(s) are out of the house for long periods in search of employment or assistance. She may also contribute money to the household through braiding hair, sewing or involvement with "sugar daddies", among other activities. School-going girls are also involved in these domestic and income-generating tasks, although the duration of their participation and the amount of responsibility is not usually as great. Boys, too, contribute to the household economy by running errands, collecting water and contributing to child care tasks when required. However, most boys' responsibilities start in earnest around the age of 11 or 12, when they begin to assist their parents in petty trading, such as selling peanuts and other roadside items, used clothing and vitenge (the brightly coloured Congolese cloth much admired by Tanzanians). Others work on their own, providing a laundry service to neighbours, hauling sand for local contractors or selling sweets outside school yards. Some non-school-going boys and girls aged 7 to 13 often speak of doing "nothing" all day long. Days spent with these children have helped me to understand that by this statement, most mean that for financial or security reasons, they are unable to leave home, see friends or visit family members elsewhere in the city.

Congolese refugee children describe their life in urban Tanzania as one of social exclusion, discrimination and harassment. It is not unusual for the children I know to walk down the street and have a Tanzanian adult or child call out to them, "*wakimbizi! wakimbizi!*" This Swahili term for refugees is widely considered to be derogatory and, in the opinion of one child: "*Even a poor man or a thief is better than a wakimbizi.*" Despite their near-constant efforts to conceal their identity, numerous refugee children in Dar es Salaam are often not successful in doing so (with the notable exception of street boys). Many endure mockery and insults on the bus, in the school yard and in their neighbourhood. These children describe being reduced to tears on a regular basis and say their lives are "miserable" because they can "never feel at ease". In a workshop with eight-to-ten-year-olds, one girl told me: "*People insult and make fun of us because we fled our country. They tell us to go home, that it is not their fault that we want to kill each other.*" Another boy noted: "*People tell me I am an idiot because I am a refugee.*"

Sometimes, Congolese refugee children respond to this harassment by verbally abusing or physically fighting with the Tanzanian children who have insulted them. Whilst retaliation may offer a child the momentary satisfaction that defending oneself can bring, fighting back has its costs. Because of their clandestine, or at least unobtrusive, urban existence, many refugee families try to have minimal interaction with unknown Tanzanians in an effort to reduce their perceived chances of being reported to the authorities. In this respect, refugees recognize the power of Tanzanian citizens to destabilize their already fragile existence. Consequently, when a refugee child has a conflict with a Tanzanian peer, refugee parents see this as a grave threat to the safety and security of their family. Despite the parents' view on the legitimacy of their child's actions, the child will often be punished in order to emphasize the potentially disastrous consequences to the family should the Tanzanian child tell their parents that they were in a fight with a refugee. The result is that the child is often angry and resentful of the perceived injustice of being punished for defending an identity that they have been raised to be proud of. These sentiments are often coupled with a sense of disillusionment with parents for failing to support them in doing so.

This sense of being unfairly treated is further exacerbated by the choice of punishment the child receives: parents frequently respond to such incidents by restricting the child's already limited mobility. This action is taken in an effort to minimize future (and potentially negative) interactions with Tanzanian children. Punishment might include not being allowed to leave the house or only being allowed to leave the house in the company of a parent. It might also mean being refused permission to go to school and being forced to remain at home all day. Congolese refugee boys and girls describe this punishment as the worst of all because, despite the sometimes cruel treatment by peers and others, it is the activities of playing with friends and going to school that provide them with what they see as the few pleasant distractions in their life of exile. The absence of these happy events compounds their discontent and dissatisfaction, not only with life in general but, more specifically, with what they see as a lack of parental support and good judgement. These negative sentiments are again aggravated by the feeling many children (especially boys) have that education is the only way to escape their current circumstances, and that by denying them the right to attend school, their parents are condemning them to a life of misery. Whilst parents view their actions in such situations as the only means of preserving the security and stability of their families, these measures may inadvertently undermine parent-child relationships, thereby reducing the familial stability and sense of collective unity they had originally sought to maintain.

In addition to the stresses posed by parent-child conflicts and misunderstandings, life as an urban refugee in Tanzania often presents families with new and difficult challenges to previous inter-generational relationships. From the perspective of Congolese refugee boys and girls, "listening to parents' fears and problems" is a major consequence of being a refugee child in Dar es Salaam. The largely isolated lives of refugee adults in the city means that parents often talk to children about things that, in their home context, would more likely be shared with close friends and family. From about the age of 12 onwards, girls and boys take on emotional responsibilities for assisting their parents with problems which they say they often feel helpless to address. For instance, one 13-

year-old girl I know often gives her underpaid mother advice on how to persuade her employer to increase her salary. Another advises his parents on how to avoid the immigration authorities when they are trying to sell cloth and other items in particular urban neighbourhoods. Older siblings often try to protect younger brothers and sisters from "hearing their parents' fears" because they feel this information will be harmful to the child's sense of innocence and calm. They try to create for their siblings an environment where they can play freely and escape the worries that preoccupy their parents. In these and many other ways, displacement has fundamentally altered relationships between family and household members: between parents and other adult family members, between children and parents, and between siblings and other children in the household.

Another issue central to the lives of refugee children in Dar es Salaam is the matter of trust. Many Congolese boys and girls in Tanzania are taught from a very young age, or say they have learned from experience, not to trust those beyond their household and/or family. The reality of this world view struck me one day when I was with a ten-year-old girl and her eight-year-old sister near the city centre. Together with the girls, I asked a stranger on the street for directions to the place we were looking for. When his instructions turned out to be incorrect, the ten-year-old turned to me and said: "*Il ne faut jamais croire les Tanzaniens*" (You must never believe Tanzanians). She, like many of her peers, had come to feel that Tanzanians could not be relied upon for help, even for something as simple as directions. I have observed that other children decline to speak to ostensibly friendly, inquiring adults and listened as others instructed their siblings in the art of evading strangers' (nosy) questions. In a culture where children speak when spoken to, these small acts of resistance are symptomatic not only of the fierce desire for self-protection but also of deeply ingrained suspicion and fear. It is no wonder that it is difficult to seek out Congolese children who lack parental protection, so great are the perceived costs of exposure and disclosure.

The competing tendency to assert and conceal one's identity is a fact of life for Congolese refugee children in Dar es Salaam. Children aged over 12 are cognisant of the fact that living in Dar es Salaam has implications for their personal freedoms. They often express the limitations on these freedoms in political terms, highlighting their lack of rights and entitlements: "*We have no freedom of movement...*", "*...we deserve the same rights as everyone else...*", "*...we want to be treated the same as other children...*", "*...our parents should be allowed to work so they can feed us and send us to school.*" The fact that many families must live clandestinely in order to avoid being sent to the camps is viewed by children as a political injustice, particularly for those who have chosen to come to Dar es Salaam precisely because they believe the camps do not offer them what they feel they rightly deserve, that is secondary-school education, opportunities for gainful employment and the ability to move as they please. The irony is that many children and families are unable to access the very services for which they came to Dar es Salaam in the first place. Some children have also expressed the opinion that no matter how hard they work at school, as long as they are in Tanzania, they will never be able to get the jobs they want because they will always be seen as *wakimbizi*. This sense of inevitable and continuous suffering contributes to the sense of victimization, despair and lack of hope for the future that undermines children's already circumscribed sense of personal and political agency.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

THE NUMBER OF refugees living in urban areas across sub-Saharan Africa has, to date, remained largely unknown. In Tanzania, a country where people associate refugees with isolated camps, there appears to be very little official recognition on the part of government and UNHCR of the extent of the urban refugee population in Dar es Salaam.<sup>(8)</sup> Until now, refugees in the city have maintained a clandestine existence in order to avoid being apprehended or troubled by the authorities. As a result, it has been extremely difficult to estimate or enumerate this significant and growing population. After nearly a year in the city, working with refugees, I would still hesitate to hazard a guess at its size. Some authorities estimate the numbers to be as low as 100, and others as high as 10,000.<sup>(9)</sup> Approximations of refugees themselves vary from “...je n’ai aucune idée” (I have no idea), to 40,000 to 100,000. Those who study African refugees have long argued that official statistics of refugee populations should be regarded with caution, and some have argued that as many as half of African refugees have never been counted or registered, preferring instead to settle unofficially in the rural and urban areas of their host country.<sup>(10)</sup> No matter which estimates are considered accurate, it is clear that there are significant numbers of urban refugees in Dar es Salaam whose circumstances are not yet acknowledged or understood. It is my hope that the debate around numbers will not become yet another stumbling block to addressing the very real problems of this population.

The fact that refugee children and families in Dar es Salaam have ended up in the situation that they are in reflects inadequacies in traditional responses to the perceived needs of refugees. In this sense, Tanzania is not exceptional; in fact, many would argue that its sometimes hostile and frustrated approach to refugees is mild compared to the challenges faced by many who seek asylum in the countries of the European Union, for example. And, while the term “refugee” encompasses a large and diverse group of people, it is clear that many share similar experiences and similar desires. For Congolese refugee children in Dar es Salaam, these wishes are straightforward: to end the war in the Congo; to be able to go to school; to have decent accommodation, clothes to wear and enough food to eat; and for their parents and guardians to have the opportunity to provide for their family. Whilst restoring peace to DRC is undoubtedly a difficult task (although not impossible), the provision of children’s basic rights can more easily be accomplished. What is perhaps the greatest challenge is to foster an environment where the less tangible but equally important elements of social acceptance, cultural tolerance and respect for human dignity are made a reality. Understanding the perspectives of refugee boys and girls is an important step in meeting these challenges.

8. Interview 5DAR01, 4DAR02, 11DAR01, 12DAR02.

9. Interview 11DAR02, 12DAR02.

10. Sommers, Marc (2001), *Fear in Bongoland: Burundi Refugees in Urban Tanzania*, Refugee and Forced Migration Studies Vol 8, Berghahn Books, Oxford.