

Lessons from Tanzania's Historic Bid to Turn Refugees to Citizens

Tanzania was lauded for offering citizenship to 200,000 Burundians, the largest-ever mass naturalization of refugees. But a political stalemate emerged between humanitarians and the government, leaving refugees stuck in the middle, explains researcher Amelia Kuch.



Tanzania offered 200,000 Burundian refugees citizenship in a historic and much-lauded move. Amelia Kuch

DURING EUROPE'S SO-CALLED migrant crisis of 2015, the Tanzanian government gave over 200,000 Burundian refugees a choice between repatriation – returning to Burundi – and naturalization – obtaining Tanzanian citizenship.

Given the choice, 79 percent of the refugees – 171,600 people – opted for Tanzanian citizenship. It is understood to be the first time in history any state has naturalized such a large group of refugees under the protection of the U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR) in a single move.

This group of refugees had fled Burundi following ethnic violence and killings in 1972 and now live in three rural settlements in Tanzania: Katumba, Mishamo and Ulyankulu. Since the 1970s, these settlements had transformed into towns: People made improvements to their homes, electricity poles were laid out and the local markets began to expand.

Research has shown that access to citizenship is an important means of resolving long-term displacement. Yet in most countries, granting citizenship to refugees is still politically unthinkable.

Tanzania has long been held up as a safe haven for refugees in the region, giving shelter to some 315,000 mainly Burundian and Congolese refugees. The naturalization of Burundian refugees was hailed as a model for progressive solutions to displacement. Yet it has led to a political stalemate between humanitarian organizations and the government, with the “refugees-turned-citizens” stuck in the middle.

Last month, the Tanzanian government halted the naturalization of another group of more recently arrived Burundian refugees and has since pulled out of the U.N.’s Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, citing lack of international funding.

During my research in the former Burundian refugee camps in Western Tanzania since 2014, I have spoken with many former refugees about the naturalization process, as well as NGO employees and government officials.

The difficulties in Tanzania are important to understanding the challenges of mass naturalization. It is not easy to turn a camp of refugees into a settlement of citizens. They also demonstrate how important it is for refugees to be able to hold both governments and humanitarian organizations accountable when things go wrong.

A Progressive Solution is Born

Negotiations around Tanzania’s naturalization policy began in 2007. They resulted in the Tanzania Comprehensive Solution Strategy (TANCOS), which was adopted that year by the governments of Tanzania and Burundi in partnership with UNHCR. The agreement had three pillars: repatriation to Burundi, granting citizenship to those who opted to pursue naturalization and relocation of naturalized refugees from the settlements to other regions of Tanzania.

Major investments were promised to facilitate the process. Some \$103 million was earmarked for relocation and integration of naturalized refugees in the 2011-15 United Nations Development Assistant Plan (UNDAP).

“Obtaining citizenship and being allowed to stay here brought peace into my heart. Before I lived in fear.”

Eventually, the resettlement pillar was abandoned because of logistical problems and local resistance to resettling refugees. As a result, the new citizens were permitted to remain in the areas of the settlements in which they had lived for the past four decades. They can now vote in national elections and join political parties.

“Obtaining citizenship and being allowed to stay here brought peace into my heart. Before I lived in fear,” said one former refugee named Daniel.

Left in Limbo

Yet the initial TANCROSS agreement did not include any detailed plans for the refugee settlements after the naturalization of their residents. As a consequence, today the area remains in a governance limbo.

Every refugee camp had a settlement officer who represented the Ministry of Home Affairs and was responsible for governing the area. Settlement officers remain in power in all three settlements, and they continue to act as the highest authority and arbiters of conflicts.

“Naturalization certificates are important because they allow us to move, but opening of this space is crucial and still needs to happen,” said one church leader in Ulyankulu, referring to the full integration of the settlements. “As long as we still have a settlement officer and a closed space, the process is not complete.”

It remains unclear when and how a transition to local governance will take place and what rights to the land the new citizens have. The Tanzania Strategy for Local Integration Program for the New Citizens (TANSPLI), drafted in 2016, stipulates the creation of a master land use plan for the settlements and the surrounding areas, followed by the registration of villages in each settlement and provision of documentation for land rights.

“It’s like a marriage with no certificate.”

However, the timeline for implementation is unclear. It “hinges on the availability of funding for the planned development projects,” according to Suleiman Mziray, who is assistant director of refugee services at Ministry of Home Affairs.

“People here don’t have ownership, you can be taken off your land at any time,” said one elderly man from Kaswa village in Ulyankulu settlement. “It’s like a marriage with no certificate.”

Lack of Accountability

Some of these challenges have led to a political stalemate between humanitarian organizations and the government, with each claiming the other has not kept its promises. Meanwhile, residents of the settlements suffer the consequences, as they wait for citizenship documents and investment in infrastructure like access to clean water.

Due to major delays in the distribution of citizenship certificates by the government, international funding for the promised development projects was redirected to other emergencies. Some of the aid was initially meant for resettlement, so once the refugees were allowed to stay in the former camps, funds were reallocated. Now that they are no longer refugees but citizens, they fall into a responsibility gap. “We have done our part,” a UNHCR official told me on condition of anonymity.

On the other side is the Tanzanian government: frustrated and disillusioned. They say they were promised that major investments will follow the distribution of citizenship but they never arrived. “We kept our part of the deal and distributed citizenship. But none of the promises materialized,” said an official at the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The government says it does not intend to invest in the settlements for now, as they are still hoping that international funding might come through eventually.

Earlier agreements left it ambiguous who would be responsible for implementing the administrative, developmental and social programs that were designed to turn former refugee settlements into properly integrated towns and villages. Without accountability mechanisms, it is hard for former refugees to hold humanitarian organizations or the government to their initial promises.

Three Lessons from Tanzania

Clearly, the design and implementation of the naturalization policy was far from perfect. The experience of Tanzania offers a few important lessons.

First, if similar mass naturalization policies are to be implemented elsewhere, it is key that they are drafted as binding documents, where the parties dedicated to the process (both national governments and international organizations) can be held accountable if they do not deliver on the promises and commitments made within an agreed timeline.

Second, such policies should be more carefully drafted, incorporating provisions on post-naturalization arrangements regarding local governance and land ownership.

Finally, despite the pitfalls and unforeseen challenges, my interviews with former refugees shows that naturalization is very important to them. They are acutely aware that citizenship is not a panacea, but firmly maintain that access to legal status provides them with a sense of security and the right to remain in the country, allaying fears of forced repatriation and deportation.

WRITTEN BY
Amelia Kuch