

The Enormous Struggles Facing a Refugee Family in Uganda

By Emily Kembabazi

Under normal circumstances, a child of fifteen years should be looked after by his or her parents. But with Diego Mweze, it's different. Diego is a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and a Primary seven pupil at Namungoona Orthodox Primary school. He also attends art classes at Namungoona Children's Art Center.

Mweze is a single orphan and a sixth child in the family of seven children, four girls and three boys. He has lived in Uganda since 2015 up to-date. He lives with his family- the mother, his elder sister Victor and the young brother, Benjamin.

However, his mother is diabetic. Diego who could hardly hold his tears to flow explained that, "my mother's health deteriorated in 2017, shortly after my father's death. She feels severe neuropathy, dizziness, blur visions and feet numbing." She was advised to take medicines for diabetes every day, but she rarely takes it. According to Diego, his mother used to get some free medicines at Kawala Health Center 111, but not anymore. She cannot walk or stand by herself right now. Kawala Health Center 111 is a government healthy facility and is about 3kms from Diego's home. "Many times Victor and I have walked up to the facility to seek medical help for our mother, but usually medicines are not there. But also, we have often been told by health workers that even if the medicine was available, it would be impossible for us to get it on her behalf."

"If I were to go along with my mother, then I would need to hire at least a boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) which I cannot afford. And since there is always no medicine at the health center, the best option would be buying from the pharmacies or private clinics which also need money," the young boy observed. This is true in Uganda; nobody can get any medicine on behalf of a patient unless he or she presents the patient's card. Unfortunately, most facilities don't give cards to diabetic patients unless the patient is also HIV/AIDS positive which is not the case with Diego's mother.

Moreover, Diego's family does not eat unless he goes to Jim Nsamba, the Director of Namungoona Children's Art Center whom he addresses to, as "Uncle Jim". "Uncle Jim has been so supportive to me and my family. Often times, he helps me to buy food for my family and some pain killers for my mother. I shall forever be grateful to him." Diego said.

On how he manages to look after his sick mother, and also attends school and art classes, he explained that due to lack of school fees, his elder sister dropped out of school. She is the one who helps him to look after their mother and the young brother when he is away for studies. Diego revealed that if it wasn't the wars that led them to

flee Congo, he would be in senior three by now and Victor, would be in high school. "It makes me feel sad, very sad when I see my siblings not in school," he added.

Like any other child, Diego has a dream. His dream is to become an artist. "I truly love art with all my heart. It's like I can't live without art because when I am drawing and painting, I feel extremely happy. It's rare to find me painting or drawing and I am not smiling."

He continued, "my wish is to study Art up to University. I want to be known in the whole world as an artist. I also want to teach art. I love teaching. So, if anyone asked me what I need right now, I would swiftly say, financial help to stay in school and achieve my dream, and also support my mother and siblings."

I asked Diego how it feels to be called an assistant teacher at Namungoona Children's Art Center. He smiled and said, "It feels so good! It's a privilege and honour to me. In fact, where I stay, everyone knows me and respects a lot. They know how I have, and still helping some of their children to learn art skills through the guidance of Uncle Jim."

"So you are a celebrity where you live, right?" I joked with him. He laughed uncontrollably.

Diego is a role model and mentor to some of the younger students at the Art Center. Ten-year-old Jordan said, "Diego introduced me to Uncle Jim and the art classes. I was welcomed and felt at home. I can now do painting and pencil drawing. Both Uncle Jim and Diego are now helping me to learn how to design," Jordan testified.

Diego on the other hand is so thankful to the Namungoona Children's Art Center where he has been able to learn painting, designing, pencil drawing and texture. He however mentioned some of his challenges such as lack of art materials to try new things. "Each time I get an idea, I want to write it down through painting or drawing but usually, I find myself with no materials to use. At times, Uncle Jim gives me some materials but other times he also doesn't have." Some of his challenges were evidenced during the interview when I visited his family. You could clearly see how hungry they were; yawning over and over again, tears rolling over their faces. They had last eaten food two days back. "We mainly survive on drinking water."

Doricus Mapendo, Diego's mother confirmed. In my observation, Diego's mother would not be in the condition she is in right now, if she had access to medicines and food. Diabetic patients are advised to take medicines with food because they are so strong to cause dizziness, headache and stomach upset. But according to Mapendo, whenever she manages to get medicines, she at times takes it on an empty stomach. Her story was not different from what Diego had already told me.

She narrated how they escaped from DR Congo amidst wars and killings by the rebels. Mapendo had been married for 35 years and had seven children. But unfortunately, they managed to flee with only three; Victor, Diego and Benjamin.

"We decided to run away from Congo after witnessing so many people being killed and many houses burnt. While running with other groups of refugees, the other four children got lost from us. I and my husband managed to remain with these three because they were still young. He carried Benjamin on his back and held Diego's hand while I held Victor's hand.

"We couldn't stop to look for them because there were bullet shots everywhere. Since 2015, we have never returned to Congo. I really don't know whether my children are still alive or dead. But the information I have is that all our relatives including my siblings and parents were killed others were burnt in their houses into ashes."

Doricus recalls how they walked for over a week from Congo up to the Uganda border "Bunagana." From there, they travelled by a lorry up to Kampala. They then went to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offices where they stayed for some days before finding their way to Namungoona where they have lived since then.

The family was lucky enough to have Congolese friend who had stayed in Namungoona for some years. She owned an old three-room house which she sold to Diego's father at a very low price. Their friend had gotten a funded opportunity to go overseas to settle as a refugee, Mapendo says. She added that even though they have not been renting for all this time, their life has never been the same again ever since they left Congo where they were middle class income earners.

Before her husband's death, he was a hawker in Kampala, selling African Kitenge fabrics, a job she says was not reliable but off course better than nothing.

"Everything was shuttered when my husband passed away! We rarely eat unless Diego gets us what to eat from Uncle Jim or from our neighbours. We have no clothes and besides, my health condition worsens day by day," she said.

Doricus sees no way through because even their house may not last for months before falling apart. Big cracks all over the walls are visible. "It becomes worse when it rains. The water enters into the house to the level of my bed," she said.

In 2018, she decided to rent part of the house (two rooms) but after a few months, all the tenants left because the rooms developed serious cracks and roof leakages. Of now, the family has no any source of income. Mapendo's last born, Benjamin was already in primary three but he could not continue because of financial constraints. Also, her daughter, Victor who is now seventeen years dropped out of school because of the same problem. Victor's dream is to do a course in fashion and designing."

Jim Nsamba had accompanied me at Diego's home. He confirmed what Diego and his family said. Nsamba has known this family for the past five years. He said that, Diego is such a dedicated, talented and determined young boy who truly likes art and his family!

"When he comes for art classes, he is not someone who wastes time. Every time, he comes with new ideas. In fact, he has been encouraging his fellow refugees and other children to come and attend art classes."

According to Nsamba, since the inception of the Art Center, over 2000 children have benefited. The community has also benefited in a way that some parents whose children drop out of school find their way to the Art center to learn art skills. Also, the children redundancy, idleness and thievery in the community have significantly reduced because many children are always occupied at the Art center and at home.

"When they come and learn skills, they go back home and start practicing. Eventually some have earned a lot from what they make. The main challenge we have right now is lack of art materials and space. Our art room is very small in comparison to the overwhelming number of children who wish to attend classes." Jim said.

He mentioned that, one of their future plans is to acquire a piece of land where an art center can be built with an office, a gallery, class room and counselling wing.

"The fact that we deal with all kinds of children including those from refugee families, we feel a counselling and guidance department is needed at our art center. But of course we cannot achieve this alone, we need people and well-wishers to stand with us."

He concluded by saying, "I take this opportunity to appreciate and thank all our friends and supporters overseas, without them none of our achievements would have been registered. Is the interview ended, the four family members in unison said in Kiswahili, "Asante sana. Mungu akubariki kwa wema wako." (Thank you so much. May God bless you abundantly for your kindness.)