

Empowering Refugee Communities: A Practical Guide to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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“Together, let’s bridge the gap between hardship and hope, empowering refugees to rebuild their lives with dignity and opportunity.”



Image 1: Many refugees in Uganda waiting in a long line so they can get help. Each person usually gets about \$3.50 USD per month.

Introduction

As a Fellow at [Practical Diversity and Inclusion \(PDI\)](#) and as a Congolese refugee living in Uganda, I am passionate about the idea of empowering refugee communities, particularly those facing the challenges of displacement in different refugee settlements in Uganda like the Kyaka 2, Kyangwali, Bidi Bidi, Nakivale, Rwamwanja, Rhino and everywhere in the world. Through my journey, I’ve come to understand the manifold hurdles refugees encounter in accessing education, employment, and opportunities for personal growth.

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the challenges faced by refugees, particularly those from the Congolese refugee community, and to highlight the transformative potential of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in creating more inclusive environments. This article is aimed at a broad audience, including funders, organisations, educational institutions, and individuals interested in supporting refugee communities through initiatives such as scholarships and other forms of assistance.

The Refugee Experience

In the heart of a bustling refugee settlement, amidst the dust and uncertainty, lives Maria, a resilient soul who embodies the quiet strength of those who have faced unimaginable challenges. Maria, a Congolese refugee, found herself uprooted from her homeland, leaving behind everything she knew and loved in pursuit of safety and peace. But the journey was far from easy. With no access to formal education and limited employment opportunities, Maria's days were filled with uncertainty and longing. Yet, despite the odds stacked against her, she dreamed of a world where education was not a luxury but a fundamental right, where employment was not a distant dream but a tangible reality. Though the road ahead seemed daunting, Maria refused to let despair dim the flame of her aspirations. With unwavering resolve, she sought out opportunities to learn and grow, volunteering in community initiatives and offering a helping hand to fellow refugees.

Refugees, especially those from regions like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), often find themselves in precarious situations, grappling with the aftermath of conflict, displacement, and systemic barriers. In places like the Kyaka 2 refugee settlement and many more refugee camps in Uganda, Refugees face significant challenges in accessing quality education and sustainable livelihoods. These barriers not only hinder our personal development but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

Challenges

I've organised talks with fellow refugees and presentations focusing on refugee challenges. These initiatives have sparked engaging discussions and highlighted the importance of inclusive practices in empowering refugee communities.

Some of the common challenges we have encountered that hinder our ability to thrive include:

1. Language Barriers: We struggle to access services due to language differences. For instance, we Congolese use French and other local languages. We face challenges communicating in Uganda, where different languages are used, for example, English. Without programs that allow us to access English classes, we find it hard to integrate and access essential services and opportunities.

2. Lack of Qualification Recognition: Refugees frequently find that their qualifications aren't recognized in the Host countries posing barriers to securing relevant Education and employment opportunities. For example, someone who completed class 4 (senior 4) in Congo DR their level isn't valued the same in Uganda. This brings feelings of insecurity and imposter syndrome, as refugees feel like they're not valued or respected for their education and skills, forcing them to start their educational or career journey from a lower level than they anticipated.

3. Psychological Trauma(lived experience): Many refugees experience mental health issues due to the violence and displacement they endured. This trauma can make it challenging for them to adjust to their new environment and feel a sense of belonging. It's a reality that's difficult to understand unless you've lived it yourself.

4. Having to take time to queue for everything: In refugee settings, long queues for aid are common. For example, As mentioned earlier, many refugees in Uganda wait in long lines to get checked so they can get help like food. Each person usually gets about \$3.5 a month. However, not everyone in the line ends up receiving aid, leaving some without any support. Refugees endure long waits, often spending 2 weeks lining up daily, yet many do not receive any services during this time. This makes their life even harder and exacerbates the difficult living conditions, highlighting the challenges they encounter in accessing resources to meet their basic needs and support.

5. Discrimination in Employment: Refugees often encounter discrimination when seeking employment. Despite having skills and qualifications, they are overlooked for job opportunities simply because of their refugee status. This discrimination further limits their ability to rebuild their lives and contribute to society.

6. Limited Access to Education: Educational opportunities are often limited to a certain number in refugee camps. Even though there might be thousands of refugees who desire to pursue their higher education. Only a few are offered this opportunity. In addition, corruption can influence who receives these opportunities not only based on their competencies and qualifications. The unfair distribution of these opportunities to access education hinders refugees' ability to secure better opportunities for themselves and their families.

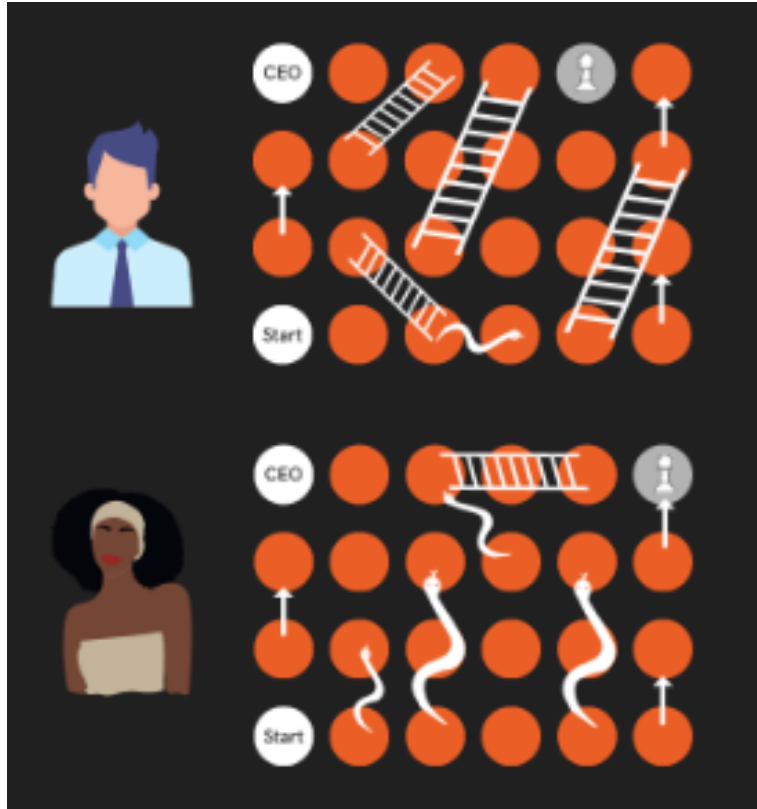


Image 2: This depicts a white man and a black woman playing snakes and ladders on different game boards. The black woman's board has more snakes and fewer ladders compared to the white man's board. A refugee's board has less ladders and many more snakes.

All of these challenges demonstrate that refugees face a different degree of difficulty than non-refugees. This is why it is important to take into account these different degrees of difficulty when working with refugees and other people from one or more marginalised groups.

Practical Diversity and Inclusion (PDI) Frameworks

[The PDI Fellowship Programme](#) offers a ray of hope for individuals like me who are navigating the complexities of displacement and seeking avenues for empowerment. Through this fellowship, I've been empowered to share my experiences and called to be an advocate for change. By using the Capability Maturity Model for Practical Diversity in Organisations and the Intersectionality Spectrum Framework, I've gained insights into how systemic inequalities impact refugees' lives and ways to address them.

The [Capability Maturity Model for Practical Diversity](#) is like a roadmap for companies to get better at promoting diversity and inclusion. In addition, it helps organisations see where they are and what they can do to improve.

CMM Level	Understanding	Key Question
#1 Systems encouraging lack of diversity	There is no understanding	There are no questions being asked.
#2 Systems neutral that keeps status quo	There is understanding of blatant issues in diversity, but not systemic issues.	How do we stop unconscious bias and only judge on skills and experience?
#3 Individuals actively fighting the status quo	There is understanding of blatant and systemic issues in diversity by individuals.	How do we get privileged people to give people from marginalised groups more opportunities?
#4 Systems improvement in one organisation	There is understanding of blatant and systemic issues across the organisation.	How do we build systems to give people from marginalised groups more opportunities?
#5 Systems improvement across organisations	There is understanding of systemic issues across multiple organisations.	How do we build systems to give people from marginalised groups more opportunities?

Table 1: The Capability Maturity Model for Practical Diversity has 5 levels - systems encouraging lack of diversity, systems neutral that keeps status quo, individuals actively fighting the status quo, systems improvement in one organisation, systems improvement across multiple organisations. Each level has the underlying understanding of DEI in that level, and the key question for that level.

When it comes to helping refugees, this capability maturity model helps in three ways. It shows that:

1. when organisations adopt a neutral policy, that nothing will change for the most marginalised people, including refugees,
2. individuals can make a difference without having to wait for the organisation to agree on doing something, by sharing their power and giving people from marginalised groups more opportunities, and
3. organisations can make a difference by systematising the sharing of power.

The [Intersectionality Spectrum Framework](#) helps us understand the interconnected nature of social identities and how they intersect to shape individuals' experiences. This framework highlights that different refugees can have different degrees of difficulties that go beyond their status as refugees, eg. a male refugee in good health has a lower degree of difficulty relative to a female refugee with a disability.

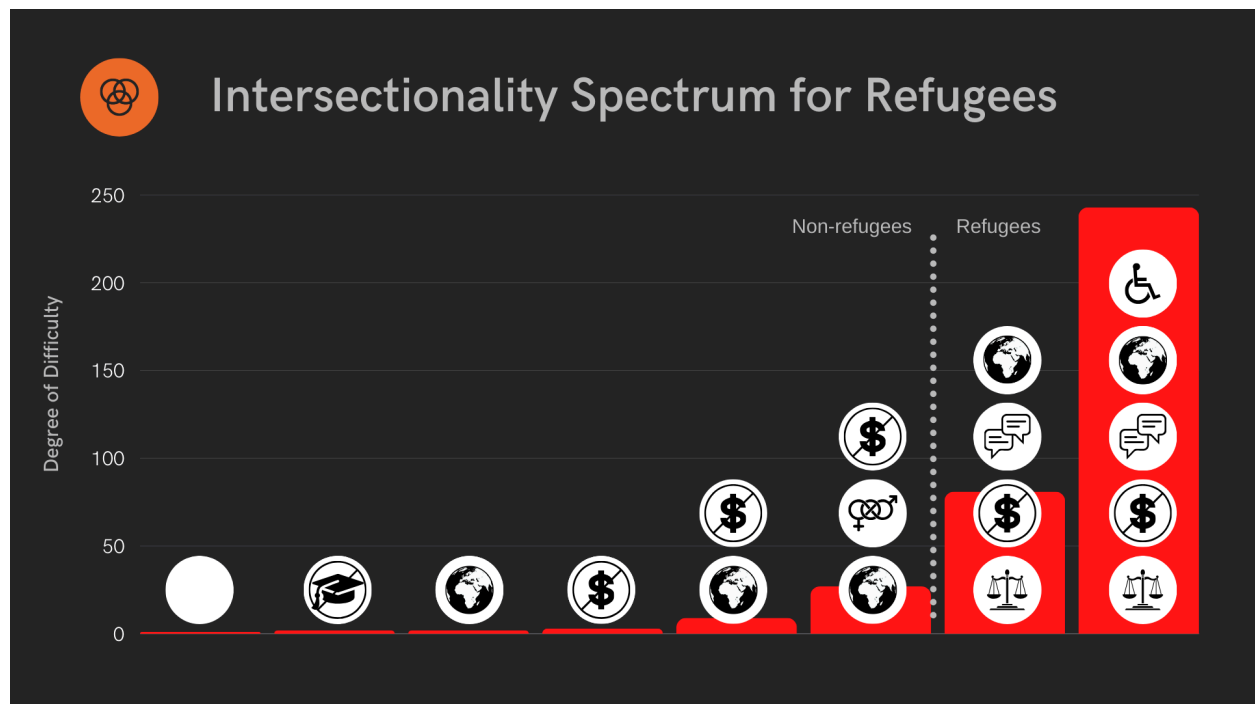


Image 3: Intersectionality Spectrum for Refugees shows the increased degree of difficulty for non-refugees versus refugees, with the focus on providing more support to the people on the right of the spectrum than to the people on the left. This is similar to how a hospital should triage patients, in that we need to look after the sickest people first.

Key challenges to focus on when thinking of refugees that have been incorporated into this Intersectionality Spectrum include:

- 1. Cultural Background:** Refugees from different cultural backgrounds may face varying degrees of difficulty in accessing funding.
- 2. Educational Background:** Educational disparities among refugees can also influence their access to education and funding opportunities. For instance, As a Congolese refugee who had limited access to formal education in my home country I struggle to meet the educational criteria set by some universities and funders, reducing my chances of securing funding and education opportunities.
- 3. Legal Status:** The immigration status and documentation significantly impacts the eligibility for certain funding streams. A Congolese refugee with uncertain or precarious legal status may face additional barriers in accessing funding compared to those with an acceptable legal status.
- 4. Gender Identity:** Gender can intersect with refugee status to shape experiences and opportunities for funding. For instance, a Congolese refugee woman may face unique challenges related to gender discrimination and limited access to resources, impacting her ability to access funding compared to her male counterparts.
- 5. Health and Disability:** Refugees with health issues or disabilities encounter barriers in accessing funding due to additional support needs or discrimination. For example, a Congolese refugee with a disability requires specific accommodations to participate in funding processes, which may not always be provided by funders.
- 6. Socioeconomic Status:** Socioeconomic factors, such as income level and access to financial resources, also influences refugees' ability to access funding. For instance, a Congolese refugee from a lower socioeconomic background faces challenges in meeting financial requirements or providing matching funds for grants.
- 7. Language Proficiency:** Language proficiency is crucial for refugees to effectively engage with funding opportunities and navigate application processes. For example, a Congolese refugee may encounter challenges related to language barriers, impacting their ability to navigate funding applications and requirements effectively.

Considering these intersecting identities and barriers, organisations can develop more inclusive and equitable approaches to supporting refugee communities in accessing vital funding resources.

How to practically apply these frameworks to make things better for refugees

To address these challenges and support refugees in rebuilding their lives, we can take the following actions as individuals and as organisations.

How Individuals Can Help:

To get your organisation from Capability Maturity Model Level 2 to 3, it only takes an individual to share their power with refugees. Here are three practical tips that they could do as individuals:

1. Aim to follow 50 refugees on social media, especially those that belong to other marginalised groups, such as a female refugee with a disability. Amplify the perspectives and opinions of these refugees, by sharing their social media posts with your networks, especially from those that belong to other marginalised groups.
2. Identify refugees and people from refugee backgrounds in your industry and proactively reach out to them to build relationships with them.
3. Find ways to sponsor refugees and people from refugee backgrounds. Send them appropriate opportunities that you find (or created) to help them make up for the opportunities that they have lost. eg. Provide them with appropriate speaking opportunities that were offered to you.

How Organizations Can Help:

To get your organisation from Capability Maturity Model Level 3 to 4, the organisation can make a difference by systematising the sharing of power. Here are three practical tips that they could do:

1. Educate members of your organisation on how to share power as individuals, especially your leaders, based on the suggestions of how to go from level 2 to level 3.
2. Embed Achievement Relative to Opportunity into selection criteria using a custom version of the Intersectionality Spectrum that is relevant in that context and badges refugee status eg. Global impact: Demonstrated ability of this leadership team to develop talent from all parts of the world, especially Africa, Asia and South America, and with people of all types of legal statuses, such as citizens through to refugees.
3. Get reviewers who are refugees or who have refugee backgrounds with appropriate skills and pay them to review submissions. Especially do this for ones that belong to other marginalised groups, such as a female refugee with a disability.

Conclusion

The journey towards diversity, equity, and inclusion for refugee communities is both a challenging process and rewarding at the same time. Through initiatives like [Practical Diversity and Inclusion\(PDI\)](#) and collaborative efforts, we can create a brighter future for refugees, where they are valued, empowered, and given the opportunity to realise their full potential. Together, let's continue to advocate for change and build more inclusive societies where no one is left behind.

Keywords

Refugee Empowerment, Diversity and Inclusion, Intersectionality, DEI Framework, [Practical Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship](#), Kyaka 2 Refugee Settlement, Democratic Republic of Congo, Advocacy.