

Refugee paralegals

By Christian Musenga

Refugees in Kenya face multiple challenges. In addition to the long process of recognition or rejection of refugee status, these challenges include lack of access to documentation and services – including refugee registration processes, business and work permits, student pass, bank accounts, social security numbers, travel documentation and mobile communication. Refugees also experience difficulties relating to police harassment, a general lack of knowledge of refugee issues, negative and discriminatory attitudes from local populations and barriers to foreign qualifications recognition.

In order to address this, some refugees in Nairobi have been trained by the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) Kituo Cha Sheria, supported by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the UN Migration Agency (IOM), as paralegals to support fellow refugees. A paralegal is someone who has either a basic legal training or more extensive practical legal experience, who provides legal assistance to facilitate access to rights and justice. Their work is generally supervised by a lawyer, law office or any legal institution.

Refugee paralegals sensitise refugee groups and public authorities on refugee rights through forums, workshops, training and conferences and also contribute to the capacity building programme of authorities to appropriately handle refugee cases, including how they conduct, stop, arrest and detain forced migrants and on how refugee documents should be issued and verified. They also contribute to awareness-raising activities for government representatives to improve their knowledge of refugee issues.

Refugee paralegals also work to empower the refugee community by providing guidance on their rights and obligations, including how to react when stopped, arrested or detained and how to approach authorities on matters of documentation. They provide refugees and asylum seekers with information

regarding their asylum application and their refugee status, offering advice on their cases, making referrals and following up on cases. They advocate for the release of arrested refugees, asylum seekers and other forced migrants at police stations, prisons and places of detention, and accompany refugees on visits to organisations and institutions to seek assistance on various social issues (for example, to police stations in order to report crimes).

As a lawyer, I have a legal background and therefore have an obligation to help my community, so I became a refugee paralegal. Refugee paralegals are able to undertake work that large international NGOs have difficulty with or do not undertake due to their budget limitations and the scope of their work. For example, I am able to intervene in refugee cases (especially arrest and harassment cases) at any time of the day or night, including on weekends and holidays; large organisations only intervene during their hours and days of work. We also advise, refer and follow up on cases, giving feedback to refugees, which means they do not have to pay the costs of transportation to these NGOs, whose offices are all far from where refugees live. Importantly, refugee paralegals are based where refugees live. We deal with refugees on a daily basis as the majority of us are also refugees and live as part of the refugee community. In the community where I live and work we have established a forum where refugees can share their own ideas on legal and livelihoods issues.

In the course of my work as a refugee paralegal I have assisted many refugees. One Congolese refugee, who was conducting business without a business permit, was arrested for being in Nairobi unlawfully. He had previously been refused a business permit by the local authorities because they felt he lacked adequate identification. I advocated for his release by proving that his registration papers (from both the government and UNHCR) were issued to him in Nairobi, thereby giving him the right to live there. Following his release I also assisted him to obtain a business permit so that he could continue to do business lawfully in Nairobi.

I also helped a Somali refugee who was living in Dadaab refugee camp by advocating on her behalf with the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) in

Nairobi when she was dealing with logistically complex demands for paperwork during the process of preparing to join her mother, who had been resettled in the United States. My intervention on her behalf, which included accompanying her to the RAS office, helped to avoid a delay in the process.

There are still important steps that need to be taken to make life legally secure for refugees in Nairobi. Refugee paralegals are currently lobbying the Government of Kenya to apply all the provisions of the Refugee Act 2006 to ensure refugees receive full protection in Kenya. We must also advocate for the government to facilitate local integration, opening doors to make refugees feel welcomed and safe, since many cannot return to their countries and their chances of resettlement are low. One way of doing this would be by establishing a permanent awareness-raising programme for police and other public administration officers in order to build their capacity to handle refugee cases. Both refugees and government authorities must know refugees' rights and have the power and knowledge to advocate for them. Refugee paralegals in Nairobi are working to make sure this happens.

Borders

A poem about the ability for European people with passports to cross a border with no trouble whatsoever, while people who seek refuge experience borders as an obstacle and is the cause for serious hardship. It was inspired by walking from Greece to Macedonia as a person from a foreign land.

cross lines without meaning

just one look

ahead without dreaming

that's all it took

i get a pass

while others not so fast

we all foreigners to this land

to us all it is foreign, land

stressed they will tress

it's such a mess around me

i am free because of what's in my hand

they are trapped as it's lost from their hands

walls put up, imaginary

fences and barbed wire

find a place for the dead to be buried

hopes crushed, barely living tired

borders taking shape

an unwelcoming sign

people following orders

media frenzy turns them blind

eyes opened to reality

difference between love and hate

accepting inhumane casualties

divided yet the same fate

all part of one kind or so I thought

your birth place identifies who you are

word association what we are taught

reached for non-existing stars

seek refuge in world you don't know

not allowed to stay

get refused for what you can and cannot show

please go back the same way

while i freely travel

whole lives get unraveled

if only we would break down the borders

that we created to separate and keep order

**by Jelle Wassenaar- Issues Without Borders member, former volunteer in a
refugee camp**

a Number, a Name

A poem from two different perspectives about refugees who are lost in the numbers, currently living in a camp where they are usually asked for their tent / isobox number when on the receiving end of food, hygiene items and such. I've tried to paint the picture from a camp resident and a volunteer (who are wearing name tags).

a number, I have a name
reduced to ones and zero
because of where I came from
so much I lost in the stats
I am a number, I had a house
now I have a number
isolated in a box
boxed in between isos
so many strangers, in this place
for 12 months, I am going crazy
plucking my beard
lining up twice a day, used to be three
they recognise my face, do not ask my name
I am not myself, say the number
been doing this for ages

not much to do beside sleep and eat

a community that's gated

changes made

how many adults, children & babies

how can they get it wrong

guess this one is new

frustrated but still say thank you

sit at a table, ask the number

daily routine, bring the key

not that important, part of our duty

food is not that good

still try to sell it to everyone

waste, too and so much, too less

our list a mess

organisations don't share

people lie and take

faced with so many

we should recognise faces

more difficult than it sounds

fool me once, I get it

fool me twice, I should know better

sorry it was picked up

sorry no more juice, bad luck

a community yet not one

people the victims

we apologise when we see that look in their eyes

I know the number of a few, pick up together too

most know my name, can't say the same

I smile, but feel like I've treated you inhumane

**by Jelle Wassenaar- Issues Without Borders member, former volunteer in a
refugee camp**

Complicated

A poem about the complicated world of helping people (as a volunteer) and how one can struggle with emotions as you enjoy your time, but also questioning whether you came with the right intentions and or if your actions do more harm than good. I also touch on the constant depression (trauma) and hopelessness that is present underneath the surface for the people you are working with, even if they seem content or happy.

One of the best times of my life

and the worst of theirs
the time not in their possession even
lost in the wind that blew
turned everything upside down
they smiled while I shed tears
orange vests in numbers
some sought that thrill
an adventure or a trip
how lucky we are
just purchase your wings
ability to fly
identity unknown
fill in some papers to prove you are alive
do they not exist?
behind the label there is nothing of the sort
came along for the ride
said goodbye, but not really
stuck between worlds
I do not understand
stuck between words
nothing I can say
yet there we all are

speaking a language we know
is it enough?
the future tells a story of the past
good intentions do not predict
a positive outcome for you perhaps
who did you come here for? photographs
you go home richer questioning why
there is power in gratitude
some of the best times of whose lives
mine, ours, yours, theirs,
some of the worst
or is it? selfishly partly
mind yourself
happiness in misery
depression in laughter
there are so many sides
yin yang plus minus
try to keep a balance
life, the best or the worst
still undecided

By Jelle Wassenaar, Issues Without Borders Members, volunteer in a refugee

camp

Darkness

A poem I wrote while in Greece about the trip people make from Turkey via Farmakonisi – a military island – to Leros.

Black sea, black ocean

mind racing, wheels in motion

a screeching voice of the blowing wind

it's loud and scary

beginning till the end

darkness surrounds me

am I blind, I cannot see

feel the drops of rain

so cold together

sharing the pain

the uncertainty, the fear

what is coming

mind numbing

it will all disappear

the cold is now wet

the screams coming from man

are we there yet

no answer on demand

survive, swim

looking at others

the outlook is bleak

alive, but grim

stumble upon rocks

found a treasure

what happens next

beyond our measure

flashlights, barks

code words cannot be cracked

a shot, light sparks

we all move back

women, children

saw them before

where are they now

see them no more?

rest on spikes

but feel numb

so cold, waiting

twisting my thumbs

salt water for days, drinking

time passing by pray, thinking

another boat crosses, sinking

chances of survival, shrinking

a sudden order after waiting

get on the big ship

where are we going, it's dark

another scary long trip

Finally reach land

greeted by man

a new beginning

where does it end?

by Jelle Wassenaar- Issues Without Borders member, former volunteer in a refugee camp

Life in the jungle

A poem about life in Calais and how it must've felt like before it got dismantled earlier this year and people were transferred to camps / centres in France.

A point near the sea

not where oceans but two countries meet

thousands stranded

human beings, they are just like us

politics inter fear, abandoned thus

where to go? this place is new

a jungle created right out of the blue

are we monkeys, trapped in a zoo?

I don't see any forest around

so many people in tents on the ground

everybody's up and have created a small town

try to stay sane as we are EU bound

kitchens, book clubs, our own economy

from Africa to Asia to the Middle-East

we have to survive together same ancestry

sure there's some squabbles and fights

but we all under the same roof come midnight

there's very little hope but we still have the light

darkness rules when nobody cares

we just trying to create a better life ain't fair

maybe big expectations, but for this you cannot prepare

so close to my family, this I cannot bear

years of oppression, war and poverty in a state

I was born in, did not choose, but chose to escape

Did I have a choice, silenced when raising my voice

can you imagine it, can you relate?

go to Europe everyone said

no option to stay here, where you will end up dead

that's what kept me going even in a sea of red

but this hole is what I found instead

there is water but it's not running properly

an open sewer so you can just pee

showers forget about it

feces all around, inhumane basically

in amidst all of this, children get lost

yet people in power worry about costs

police arrives when it burns but will they learn

we only try to get warm coming frost

some even attack us, where is the protection

luckily we have volunteers who show affection

help us so much, there's an instant connection

we are lost but we get some direction

after so much waiting you start to explore alternatives

cannot just stay here, something's gotta give

should I get on the lorry or stay positive

many have tried but came back

some were less fortunate, lost track

how can we stay sane when we supposed to crack?

every now and then the media comes impressed

and while most carry on, some protest

it's like talking to a wall, a fence at best

a life ended but the loss of revenue makes the press

together we made it work somehow

through all the grief, we laugh and dance now

because we are in a centre and made it out

where to go? we have to get on a bus

many are left behind, it's created a fuss

sadly caught in between, staying a must

the jungle is still there, you see

we are stranded where two countries meet

trying to get to the UK

but we aren't seen as equals unfortunately

politics interfered, stay in France, me?

by Jelle Wassenaar- Issues Without Borders member, former volunteer in a refugee camp

MY STORY AS A VOLUNTEER IN A GREEK CAMP IN RITSONA

From the very first moment you – a stranger – enter the community of Ritsona, you feel accepted. People see an unknown face, I see all new faces, but no need for awkward silences or elaborate ice-breakers. Being part of an established and well-respected charity group called 'ECHO100Plus' is enough. They know why you are there, a guest in their home to help out a bit. Soon plenty know your name, with or without a name tag. Of course it helps if you have a name that resembles an Arabic word, especially one so frequently used to request someone to hurry up. As you can imagine it is a reason for laughter, yet very few need one to smile.

Humans who have witnessed and gone through the worst continue to amaze me. Even more so as they are trapped in a place nobody wants to be. People are joking, patiently waiting while we assemble their food, which is not that good. I can best compare it to airplane food, but even that is a stretch at times. Admittedly it could be a lot worse in general since there is enough fruit, Arabic bread and water for everyone on a daily basis. People are grateful, kindhearted, courteous, warm and hospitable to say the least. Behind all of this there is of course anger, anxiety, frustration,

helplessness, hopelessness and indifference. It's a mix of emotions and thoughts after being in this confusing little world far away from everything else.

At times, the negative emotions come out as well and we just try to be understanding and hopefully not make it worse. This is hard sometimes, but we know it's rarely personal and the reaction has little to do with what we did or did not do. I'd do the same if I'd get the same food almost every single day, get told I cannot have an orange for my child because the cutoff age is 3 or another salad because tonight you decided we can have only one per house. Most people understand we are not in charge, it is the army / air force and we hand out as much as we can but are forced to give out per person / child / baby due to the numbers. I'm still surprised though that people often accept our explanation.

While our main task as Echo volunteers is food distribution, we also do hygiene and clothes distribution. In my first week we have had a few break-ins, which were frustrating but we did not let it get us down. People were upset about it too and of course agreed it was not right. We had it fixed every single time. We left the clothes for what they were since it was a mess every morning and they were clearly looking for something, at some point there is no point. This also counts for the perpetrators and what they took, which included some clothes but also nappies, diabetic bread, dog food, diapers and such. The items seemed random so it was almost funny. Luckily it stopped and we are currently in the process of getting a solid wall.

Partly thanks to Lighthouse Relief and some of their amazing team members we managed to solidify the wall in the meantime. Aside from their carpentry skills, they run a child and woman friendly space. There is also I am You who run educational programs. Then we have the big ones UNHCR, IOM and Red Cross. The main differences is we are there on all 7 days, pretty much for 12 hours (9-21) straight and is pretty much front and center as you enter the camp. Just like on Leros, it seems that responsibility and cooperation between all of the parties involved is the biggest challenge to give the residents the best help they can get.

Luckily, Ritsonians understand that we are limited due to politics and money. However, as this place was supposed to be temporary, some have now been here

for about a year! That is unacceptable. Standing in line twice a day for your food, then waiting for that one day when you can get coffee, tea, some wet wipes – which are not to be handed out due to clogging of pipes – and waiting for opening hours to see a doctor. Ritsona is deemed one of the better camps, probably because they live in isoboxes (caravans / mobile homes) with heating, a stove, toilet and shower. Can you imagine this being your life though?

There is a good vibe in the camp regardless of what is going on. The 2nd or 3rd day after a tragic loss of life was probably one of the most positive and vibrant days yet. The sun was shining, people were up and about, children in the playground. People have probably already been through so much that the death of a baby is not that shocking. Staying positive is also a way to deal with it of course. I have no explanation for it and I know it sounds weird, but it's the truth. Of course I mean no disrespect. The loss for me was a reminder of how fragile life is, how horrible living in a place like this must be, especially when going through something tragic as a family. Hearing other people's stories about their lives in Syria and how they feel about living here is also a reality check.

Ritsona, a surreal and very real place at the same time. In the words of a young man: "If I was human, they would not put me in a place like this". Most of my time here has been positive and it's all because of the group we have and the residents of Ritsona. There is a ritual you have to pass before you can be fully accepted and you will not see it coming. See there is an old man in his sixties / seventies nicknamed 'Baba' who usually hangs around the warehouse before food distribution. The first time I saw him someone had already spilled the beans, but I was still surprised when he did the following. He signaled me over and pointed to my shirt. I looked down and of course he hit me in the nose. Then when you walk away, as soon as you turn your back actually, you feel something stinging your calve. He hit me with his walking stick! He does it to everyone and it's hilarious. The man loves to pull pranks, also to pat you down for security reasons or for cigarettes. I recently grabbed a broom so he slowly extended his cane to increase his reach.

There are a lot of others who like to be silly and have fun with us. Two big

men who always come early together just laugh at anything and take any opportunity to crack jokes. Then there's people who prefer for certain volunteers to do their food order. Some children do likewise, one of them a girl who just says to everyone "you crazy". There are a lot of cute babies and children who wave, say hello, blow kisses or just stand there with a smile, but there are definitely some little rascals as well. One boy just keeps saying "one, one, one" and wouldn't stop. Then one day I was doing the tickets and this man at the window says lll. I look up and the resemblance is striking. That's why the boy kept saying it! Not that he needs a reason, none of them do. Just shouting "my friend" – don't try this with one of our founders though – for cups, water, a box, oranges, I want, give me, all night long..It can be annoying, but if you just have fun with it and stay positive, remind yourself they are just kids who are trying to have a normal childhood then it doesn't really matter.

People in Ritsona try to make the best out of their situation and do it with such an overall positive attitude, that they've made this place into a community that is nothing short of admirable.

by Jelle Wassenaar