

MY JOURNEY TO IMVEPI - BEACON OF HOPE

DEBBIE YIP

IMVEPI REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

Visit on behalf of STAD – March 2019

2019 did not start off well for me. I was at a stage of disillusionment; after 15 years of trying to do my bit to "change the world" and to make it a better place for the many who are suffering, I was back to naught. I knew I had to take a break, and to many, that would possibly mean a trip to the Caribbean to bask in luxurious comfort or to a mystical place on top of the mountains to sooth my senses. So, imagine my surprise and resistance when God said - visit

the South Sudanese refugees in Northern Uganda.

"Are you kidding me, Lord? I need a rest, a break from the depression and hopelessness that I am trying to run away from. Africa? Huh...ok, even if it is sans safari, but not to what, a refugee camp (!) where I am sure sheer

human desperation will be hanging in the air like the stench of death". But I went nevertheless

s, and it turned out to be my journey to the beacon of hope.



THE JOURNEY

filled with excitement mixed with trepidation...

As our car approached the Imvepi Refugee Settlement, my heart was filled with a mixture of excitement and trepidation, the latter because I was really dreading the scenes of poverty, sickness, and even death, that

we so often see in news footages of situations in refugee camps. But my trepidation gradually turned to hope as what greeted me was a lively community of people going about their daily lives, just like

the local population. There were people selling stuff in the market and students attending schools. Sure, the conditions were close to dire - classrooms were over crowded, thatched roof houses were basic and

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spartan and could not keep them from the searing heat or the torrential rains. Of course, poverty was still rampant, uncertainty about the future was still hanging on their necks, and the images and experiences of war and how they had suffered were still

etched in their memories.

But, what was so heart-warming was that there were smiles on the refugees' faces, children were playing on the playground, students were reading under the trees shielding themselves from the hot sun. Despite their

circumstances, they were not in despair. I believe **hope** is the distinctiveness that separates Imvepi (and other refugee camps in Uganda) from refugee camps in many other parts of the world. Below are five reasons why to me, Imvepi is so different and why we

Not a refugee camp but a refugee settlement

Due to the big-heartedness of Uganda (which has a primarily Christian population), refugees are given plots of land to build their homes and to start rebuilding their lives. They are allowed to engage in work like selling goods in the markets, and their houses are no different from that of the local communities, not make-shift tents.



Life in the Refugee Settlement

The students follow national syllabi & take national exams, which means that they can go on to Ugandan higher institutes of learning. In other words, they can live a normal life & integrate into society, very unlike national policies of many other host countries where refugees remain refugees throughout their stay. Refugees elsewhere have often lamented that there is no point in studying or working because they will stay in the camps for the rest of their lives & there is no hope. We can survive without many things in life, but one cannot survive long when hope is taken away. Won't you want to give to an initiative with a future and a hope?

Not doing charity but giving love

Imvepi Secondary School (which STAD currently supports 50 of the most vulnerable students, the unaccompanied minors) are staffed by godly, love-filled staff (the Head Master, the Deputy, the EPOs and teachers) who give of themselves fully to the students (not for monetary gains nor for fame – for surely, there is none; instead they live under the same conditions as the refugees, e.g. using latrines outside of their equally spartan houses), but purely from hearts filled with love for aliens in their land who had suffered under the most atrocious crimes committed in the history of mankind.



Daily, they toiled with love, and the thing that impressed me most was their incorporating Christian values into their teachings and interactions with the students, imploring them to put God first and to trust God. For surely under their care and guidance, we can look forward to future generations of godly individuals who will follow their examples to help others in need.

should give our utmost to support

them:

Not yearning for material possessions but for self esteem

If the staff are special, the students are equally special. For people who have been deprived of so much in their tender years, one would expect them to ask for food, toys, games, nice clothes and accessories, etc. that they see youths in many parts of the world are having, but instead, the first thing they asked was for school uniforms!



Initially taken by surprise, I soon found out that school uniforms give them a sense of identity as students and a source of self-esteem. My heart warmed up to the thought that we are all the same – refugees or nationals, young or old, rich or poor, we all need a sense of self-esteem, and that made me feel so much closer to these special students with whom we share a common humanity. Why will we not stand in solidarity with them and help them fulfil their rightful needs?

Not only paying back but also paying forward

STAD has a unique MoU with students we help that states that the support given is a loan which will have to be paid back when they start working and have the ability to. These will then be used to support other students in need. In addition, I have also challenged them to pay it forward by supporting other refugee students in the future when they have income-generating capabilities. Can you imagine the multiplier effect that this will create? I left the classroom feeling confident that the students will take my words to heart, as demonstrated by their plea for help for those other 793 students who are currently not being supported and by how their eyes lit up when I told them that I would try to source for additional funding for these other students. Bless these altruistic young souls who still care for others despite their own predicament. Do we still have the heart to remain indifferent to their pleas?



Not saving individuals but a country

Finally, this is my ardent prayer, that God will raise up among the students (either now or in the future) leaders who will be able to rise to positions of authority, to make policies for the country of South Sudan, that the country could be saved from its current state of internal conflicts, killings and atrocious crimes, to a country governed by God's principles and rule of law. If that happens, we can look back and say that we did not only help these suffering refugees, we have indirectly helped to save a whole nation!

Through this journey, my faith in humanity and in being able to make a difference in the lives of those suffering is revived! I am glad I am not writing a report of doom but of my audacity of hope – that the future of these refugee students can change, and not that of individuals only, but that of the country of South Sudan as well.

However, I am not sure if my optimism is being shared by the students. In a poem written by them, they were asking why God had forgotten their beloved country. My heart bled when I heard that, and I quickly tried to assure them that He has not. But who can blame them, if so much of the world does not care? Will you join me in praying and in supporting Imvepi students, and help them to truly shine as beacons of hope.

For your information, for approximately US\$3,000 (€2,700), we can support 50 students for one whole year, with their school fees, uniforms, mid-day meals, sanitary products and toiletries. If you would like to contribute or know more about the mission and programmes of STAD, please contact us, by using one of the following means:

Support Trust for African Development. Postbus 13089, 2501 EB Den Haag, The Netherlands.

Tel: +31 (0) 61.85.65.766. Email: florence@live.nl. Website: www.s-t-a-d.org.

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/Stad63429022>

Bank Account (IBAN): **NL49RABO0157370615** (Please mention the specific project you are supporting)

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Thank you for