



PRESS STATEMENT: Access to higher education for migrants and refugees symposium

13 February 2023

The Higher Education Symposium for Refugees and Migrants successfully took place on 13 February 2023. The event was jointly organised by HCI Foundation, Islamic Relief South Africa, IOM, Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, Study Trust and UNHCR. The event was held to support the vision of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals regarding education and leaving no one behind.

The event's keynote speaker was Dr. Emmanuel Taban, African Person of the Year, author, renowned pulmonologist in South Africa and a former refugee. Dr Taban said: "My purpose was always to find education... I always wanted to be a doctor since I was 7 years old." It was this goal that kept driving Dr Taban to overcome all manner of barriers during his journey as a refugee to finally achieve remarkable professional and personal success in his life. In his speech, Dr Taban emphasized the important role of higher education in building resilience and supporting cohesive societies. Dr Taban reflected on his story and the impact he has been able to make particularly in the medical field during the COVID-19 pandemic where he practised lifesaving medical techniques to fight this new complex disease. He spoke about the importance of finding and pursuing your purpose regardless of the odds. He voiced that if you encounter or experience opportunity you should embrace it. Dr Taban spoke about how he had been given a chance at a high school with the deputy principal expecting he would not return but because he was determined like many other refugees, he showed up. "Refugees never give up," he said." Dr Taban argued that skills and education are key priorities and added that to be successful community and support structures are pivotal to success. In telling his story, when told he cannot pursue school without documentation, he said that people fleeing war don't have the luxury of going back for documentation and that refugees are people, people who have to overcome a huge number of difficulties. Despite all the odds against them, they succeed and prevail. He therefore called on everyone to keep on working hard to open up opportunities for people on the move as these efforts will all contribute to a stronger Africa.

Prior to the Keynote address, in the welcome speech, Mr. Kudzanai Zishiri noted that like many foundations and entities today, Study Trust has been supporting scholarships for South Africa youth for many years. Recognising the importance of higher education opportunities for the forcibly displaced, and in keeping with the UNHCR Refugee Education Strategy 2030, UNHCR partners with Study Trust on the global DAFI program, funded by the German and other governments, to provide scholarships for refugees in South Africa and Eswatini.

The strategy recognises that inclusion in national systems and education opportunities will allow the forcibly displaced to strengthen resilience and be active participants and contributors to cohesive societies. Mr James Chapman, the Head of Advocacy and Legal Advisor at the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town was the MC at the event, Ms Kiran Kaur the Head of the UNHCR Cape Town Field office introduced the keynote speaker, Islamic relief assisted with some of the logistics and communications on the day, and Ms Lily Sanya, the Chief of Mission for IOM South Africa closed the event with the vote of thanks.

Following the welcome Mr Hylton Bergh, from Scalabrini Centre, Cape Town reported the results of a survey done to establish the extent of funding and support for tertiary education for Migrants and Refugees. This painted an initial picture of existing funding with more participants from the audience offering to complete the mapping survey and share the extent of funding and support they offer or plan to offer.

After the reflection and keynote address there was a panel discussion. Panellists for the day included Mr Michael Bagraim, Ms Aurelie Kalenga, Ms Ellen Boriwondo and Mr Jamala Safari.

Mr Michael Bagraim is a descendent of refugee grandparents and a well-known labour lawyer, who has and continues to work with the Cape Chamber of Commerce. Michael emphasised that the constitution and law are based on equality and that labour rights apply to and protect all in South Africa. He spoke to how the business sector invests in education and training and how this is affordable and favourable. Michael also spoke about how many businesses recognise the hunger, thirst and drive of refugees. He argued that the greatest scope for funding and support of tertiary studies and for the economy as a whole is in the small business sector who initially invest in people to survive and then, through hard work, to thrive.

Ms Aurelie Kalenga a journalist with the SABC, who uses innovative storytelling to spotlight pertinent issues on the African continent, hosts the morning show on Channel Africa for SABC and founded the Grace Beyond Borders NGO. Aurelie spoke to the importance of integration and looking to internships to put a foot in the door. She spoke to the challenges of accessing tertiary education and the workspace, and the number of doors closed to migrants and refugees that should be opened. She spoke to the perseverance of mobile communities and the need to good policies that support inclusion.

Ms Ellen Boriwondo is a Senior Advocacy Officer at the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, who has advised migrants and refugees extensively on accessing tertiary education funding. Ellen reflected on her journey and the challenges experienced in pursuing her undergraduate studies and masters' qualifications, hoping that the lessons learned from her story and the work she is doing will help equip others to access tertiary funding and support. She called on everyone to map and gather available resources and support building an extensive network for possible scholarships and other support for asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants.

Mr Jamala Safari is an author and poet, CEO of the HCI Foundation and former refugee from the DRC. He is also a former recipient of an HCI Foundation bursary. He reflected on his person journey in South Africa and how challenging it was to juggle his studies and multiple part-time jobs. If it wasn't for HCI Foundation's bursary, he could not have achieved his potential. The HCI Foundation allocates 5% of its bursaries to refugee and asylum seeker students, whilst the rest goes to South Africans.

Jamala encouraging philanthropic organisations and corporates to consider ring fencing a percentage of their bursary funding towards refugee and migrants, in a similar way to how the HCI Foundation does it.

Discussions questions and comments centred around the important role of private sector corporation, support, new innovative online learning possibilities, in addition to looking to the contributions of small businesses and the role of young business people. This event created a platform for diverse interested stakeholders to cooperate and collaborate on opportunities to better support scholarships, internships and other educational and vocational skills in support for persons on the move.

The event organisers hope that the discussions held at the symposium will help raise awareness on the importance of inclusion in national opportunities and strengthen stakeholder collaboration and cooperation for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants.

Contact us

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