STORIES

REFUGEE EXPERIENCES:
Surviving Life’s Unexpected Hardships
ABOUT TPO UGANDA

In 1994, we made our first move to restore hope and transform lives through offering psychosocial support. We were smaller than an ordinary local NGO.

Close to three decades later and counting, the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) has evolved and revolved into the leading local NGO offering and integrating Psychosocial support and mental wellness into programs aimed at reducing vulnerability. From communities displaced by war and related crimes to families and individuals drowning in abject poverty, struck by disasters and Gender Based Violence (GBV), children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, emergency response and building capacity of government and partners, these are just a pinch of TPO Uganda's programs and activities in up to 45 districts spread across seven regions of Uganda. We are currently in: Acholi, Lango, Teso, Karamoja sub-region, South West, West Nile and the Central regions.

Presently, TPO Uganda doesn’t have any regional presence but has previously successfully conducted projects in South Sudan, DR Congo and Somalia. We are at hand to execute any consultancies or related work outside Uganda.

VISION
A society where communities enjoy mental health and socio-economic well being.

MISSION
TPO Uganda is a rights based NGO that works in partnership with communities, civil society, the private sector and government to empower communities improve their mental health and socio-economic wellbeing in a sustainable way.

CORE VALUES
Professionalism
Transparency and Accountability
Innovation
Compassionate
Non-discriminatory
Cultural Sensitivity

OUR PHILOSOPHY
Families have to be supported to overcome emotional anguish and/or psychological distress before they can meaningfully engage in productive activity. We believe that poverty, conflict, social strife and the plight of HIV/AIDS impacts greatly on the social and emotional wellbeing of individuals and thus inhibits their ability to participate in mainstream development processes. Only when individuals are supported to acquire the right frame of mind, manage past trauma and assuage any feelings of animosity, are they able to co-exist peacefully and lead meaningful and productive lives.

OUR THEMATIC OFFERING
TPO Uganda’s biggest thematic offering is Mental Health and Psychosocial Support and this has earned us the national leadership of the Uganda Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Technical Working Group.

Our work also covers;
Child Protection (Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children)
Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Response
Food Security and Livelihoods Support
Gender Based Violence
HIV/AIDS Prevention
Capacity Building and Regional Projects.
TPO Uganda is implementing a three-year project in consortium titled “Provision of Multi Sector Assistance and Protection to Refugees in West Nile and Northern Uganda Phase Two”, thanks to funding from BPRM. Project implementation started on September 1st and is expected to close on August 31st 2023. The project is implemented by a consortium of members including International Rescue Committee (IRC) serving as the lead, TPO Uganda, World Vision International (WVI), Humanitarian Assistance and Development Services (HADs) and Uganda Law Society (ULS).

TPO Uganda specifically contributes to Project Objective One, which seeks to ensure that community-based structures have increased capacity to respond to the needs and concerns of refugees and host communities in Bidi Bidi and Palabek Refugee Settlements. Through this, TPO Uganda offers Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) with a goal of enhancing protection needs amongst beneficiaries as one of its main challenges in Palabek Refugee Settlement in Lamwo District and Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe District. The MHPSS are rooted in the Community-based structures, like Volunteer Psychosocial Assistants (VPAs) among other structures to enhance sustainability, provide holistic mental health support and encourage socio-economic wellbeing. With these structures, refugees and host communities are sensitized about mental health (Psycho education) and Psychological First Aid, case referrals, and Psychosocial support services using the Problem Management Plus (PM Plus) approach. Positive outcomes are expected in the lives of beneficiaries and the stories are documented to demonstrate these outcomes. In this book, we share the success stories of the TPO Uganda interventions as reflected in the refugee experiences and the survival tales amidst life's unexpected hardships of change – such as the ones shared in this book. These stories are a great manifestation of the project's registered impact and the future interventions. Enjoy the reading.
PROJECT AT A GLANCE

OBJECTIVE 1 (PROTECTION):
Community-based structures have increased capacity to respond to the needs and concerns of refugees and host communities in Bidibidi and Palabek.

(WV/HADS)

OBJECTIVE 3 (CP):
Refugee and host community children (0-17) in Bidibidi are protected from violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

(WV/HADS)

GOAL:
To empower refugees and surrounding host community members to contribute to their own recovery and resilience through improved access to protection, GBV, CP, and livelihoods services.

TPO MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES (MHPSS)
With funding from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM), TPO is implementing Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) in Lamwo district (Palabek settlement) and Yumbe district (Bidibidi refugee settlement). TPO MHPSS services are implemented through Volunteer Psychosocial Assistants (VPAs) among other community structures to enhance sustainability and give holistic mental health support and socio-economic wellbeing.
OBJECTIVE 2 (GBV):
Women’s and girls’ access to and participation in social and economic empowerment interventions that build self-reliance and independence in Bidibidi, Rhino Camp and Palabek is increased.

(IRC)

OBJECTIVE 4 (LIVELIHOOD):
Economic opportunities and self-reliance among refugee and host communities in and around Bidibidi are improved.

(IRC)
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STORY ONE: SARAH'S BREAKTHROUGH

What Tales the Night Brings!
Five years ago, as the war in South Sudan intensified, a recently widowed Sarah Night and her eight children had to leave their home with whatever possessions and provisions they could carry. They walked for seven days before eventually finding the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. Although unsure of what the future would hold, Sarah’s spirit held fast with the belief that the hard times would end.

For a time, they were happy — having been warmly received and given food and shelter. Sadly, this happiness was shortlived; heavy rains washed away their belongings, food and shelter. To make matters worse, the refugee camp had no water, and she could not afford to buy a 20-liter jerry can of water. Worse still, one of her sons fell from a tree and broke his shoulder, while another broke his shoulder while playing football — both were hospitalized. It seemed as if troubles had made their home in Sarah’s family.

Women in the camp had noticed that she was not herself and knowing her predicament, they grew concerned. They approached a TPO social worker with these concerns.

“I felt that God had forsaken me, and that people did not care... Why was all this trouble coming to me? I did not deserve to suffer like this.”

SARAH NIGHT
“When the women shared that Sarah had withdrawn from people, was not eating, and looked very sad, I immediately set out to find her. They had relayed their concerns with urgency, and I needed to act fast.” Susan Adong, the social worker recalls.

Sarah was invited to the women’s center, where she was diagnosed with severe depression and started on antidepressant medication. She also received individual counselling at the start, and later joined group counselling.

“... I am alive today because of the lessons I got in the groups. I had so many problems and wanted to end my life because I saw no reason to live.”

SARAH

Sarah learned how to tell her story and was supported by others who had had similar experiences. She also learned exercises that she could use to uplift herself when the depressive episodes set in — Sarah begun to feel better. Soon, she was able to return to her daily life, carrying out her chores, and participating in income generating activities such as poultry farming. She is hopeful and believes that children are the future, and for that reason, she wants her children to have the best education possible.

Today, Sarah shares her recovery story with other women in the camp through community and group meetings. Her hope is for TPO and other organisations to continue helping women in the refugee camps who are struggling with their mental health and psychosocial problems.
STORY TWO: GEORGE IS WALKING TALL

Hope for A Happy Ending
“Life isn’t what you make it up to be in your head, or as you wish. Everyone who has touched you in life, and every experience that has entered it has contributed to your life; we are all a part of one another.”

GEORGE OTIM

George is a farmer, devoted husband and father of seven - he currently lives in Wigot village, Lamwor district near the Palabek Refugee settlement with his wife and children. Every morning he wakes up, washes up, puts on his farming attire (an old t-shirt), sweeps the compound, feeds the chickens, helps his wife with chores, enjoys breakfast with his family, and then sets off to farm their land. If anyone had told Florence that her husband of over 15 years — a well-known village drunk, would act this way, she wouldn’t have believed it.

According to Florence, “George [...] was drank all the time [...] he came home filthy, and he would shout at me [demanding] for food — a special meal as though he had paid for it; and the next thing would be a fight — beating us, even the children.” She shudders at the thought. In public, Florence distanced herself from him, hoping no one knew he was her husband; George was not only the walking shame of his family, he was ridiculed by the whole community. Florence fearing for her life, took the children and went to live with her parents. George’s father couldn’t stop them, he knew how awful his son had become and it made him sad.

When TPO staff (under the BPRM project) were mapping Wigot village — to understand the mental health and psychosocial challenges people were struggling with; alcohol and other substance addictions as well as gender based violence were highlighted as significant crises.
After the mapping exercise, the team held awareness raising talks. They used picture codes to illustrate the effects of alcohol on various body parts.

“This was alarming to most of the community as majority didn’t think that the effects of alcohol were significant,” Prossy Wiwor, a TPO social worker stated, adding that “the harm caused to the body was one issue, but because poverty kept arising as a catalyst, we also supported members to calculate the cost of alcohol, that they they could understand how much money they spent every day. We tallied it up to money spent per month.”

At the first meeting, George was in attendance because he enjoyed disrupting such activities when drunk. He would later admit, that he had given up on himself — unable to live alcohol free, and the shame and failure made him sink deeper. George was the poster boy of alcoholism, poverty, domestic violence, and family disintegration.

“I drink alcohol to remove stress, enjoy [myself] with my friends, pass the time, and to relax, and sometimes when I’m drunk, I insult people. I fight with my wife and family because they don’t respect me. They think I am stupid. This is life to me and I will not stop.”

GEORGE

George’s slurred speech stunned community members at that first TPO awareness raising session. Florence had attended in hiding, and while she wasn’t surprised, it was painful to watch. The worst part, is that she too had started drinking to calm herself and she was ashamed.
TPO social workers recognized the pain George and his family were going through and began to brainstorm ways to support them. They created a care plan for George and his family that included: family mediation, as well as individual and couples' counselling.

In counselling, George revealed that life had become unmanageable and that he found it difficult to look after his family. He also became aware of the real damage of alcohol addiction and requested to stay with the picture codes to remind himself what alcohol abuse was doing to his body. The other thing that bothered him, was how he was losing money — George was spending beyond his means and lost time (many working hours) at the bar. This was his turning point.

Soon after the first few sessions of counselling, George and his father were able to go to Florence’s family and ask for forgiveness. Florence and the children returned home with him to try and live together again.

The TPO team intensified family counselling, helping them to share and forgive the hurts they experienced, and plan ways to keep them (particularly George) on the road to peace and sobriety. The more George reduced his alcohol intake the more time he had to think clearly and tend to his work; the counselling helped him make amends with his family.

“I have never saved any money in my entire life, but I will try my best to save money. I realized that because of over drinking, my wife had given up on hygiene at home because I was always dirty.”

GEORGE
After four counselling sessions, the healing begun in earnest. When the social workers talked to the neighbors, they gladly testified that George was a changed man and not violent any more. Florence was also excited that George bought three bulls which he uses to plough the gardens. His health, hygiene, and finances had also improved. Florence happily stated, “These days we share work and we have all improved on our hygiene [...] I used to bath once in a week, but now, I bath frequently. George has even gained weight because he eats well now days, he used to sleep hungry.”

George believes that his many years of drunkenness cost him a lot of time and money. Currently, he is a champion in Wigot Village - raising awareness about the risks of alcohol and substance addiction; he is committed to helping others do better than he did. He has also been able to save money from his brick laying and is building a new house for the family. George now walks with pride in his community and has his family’s respect.
STORY THREE: VERONICA’S RESILIENCE

What’s Life Got to Do with It?
Veronica Lakulu is a well-recognized voice in her community, an inspiration to fellow women in Palabek Refugee Settlement. However, a few years ago, Veronica wanted to end it all — she suffered unimaginable horror during the civil war in South Sudan.

“When we were in Sudan, I had gone to the garden when rebels fell upon us, attacked and killed my 13-year-old daughter and then they proceeded to take turns on me. I could not walk.”

VERONICA

The 53-year-old Veronica lives in the Palabek Refugee Settlement, Gem sub county, Lamwo district with her husband and nine children. Veronica and her husband keep some poultry and cattle on which their livelihood depends. She is the picture of strength and composure. However, her journey to recovery was not an easy one. The horrific events of the war had left her broken and deeply traumatized. One only has to watch her face as she recounts the story, to know that it is still painful for her to talk about.

Veronica says she had to crawl for days to find her home, and even then she knew that they had to leave the place. She and her family walked for ten days to cross the South Sudan-Uganda border to find refuge.
Veronica recalls trying to overcome her traumatic experience by drinking alcohol. She admits that in those days, she struggled — she felt hopeless and wanted it all to end, she later attempted suicide.

“I [had] started drinking waragi (a local brew), which enraged my husband because he does not drink alcohol.”

VERONICA

Thanks to a meeting organized by the TPO social workers, Veronica met other women with similar stories of trauma; they were receiving counselling and doing well. Encouraged, she decided to join the sessions and learned exercises to help her cope with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It took longer to convince Veronica to consider reducing her alcohol intake, but eventually she gave it up. This was a transformative time for Veronica, she learned that her life did not have to end; she too could be helped.

The change in Veronica has become an inspiration for her community; where they once saw a distressed woman, they now have a hopeful voice encouraging others to seek help.

Veronica is now a member of the Bedo Maber Loyo Lonyo (staying well is better than wealth) Village Savings and Loans Association. She has also joined a catering group where she and others have learned to bake bread, which they sell to residents in the neighbourhood. She is also engaged in several projects, including poultry and goat rearing, and hopes to open a general merchandise shop once she has enough money to send her children to school.
STORY FOUR: UNSTOPPABLE JERISA

Finding a Path to Peace
The 2016 civil war in South Sudan disrupted many lives. Jerisa — a mother of five and the second wife of Gabriel Musa had to flee their home along with her extended family.

Back in Sudan, the families lived a fair distance away from each other, and this helped to maintain harmony between the co-wives and their children. However, life in the refugee camp forced the families closer — disrupting their delicate peace. Quarrels and fights ensued over food rations or from the shame of living on handouts when they had previously been able to sustain themselves. Jerisa could not cope; she felt hopeless and despised her situation.

According to social workers in the settlement, Jerisa was depressed. Her attitude was often negative, she felt unworthy, and lacked a sense of control. Jerisa was also always tired and experienced terrible headaches. As her situation deteriorated, life on the homefront also worsened, so much so that her husband would no longer share a bed with her. By this point, she was at an all-time low.

“My co-wife and I stayed in separate villages, and we were living our respective private lives, and this made us all live peacefully. Now my husband brought us all together [...] a bigger family of more than 13 dependents.”

JERISA SIPE

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“I could not stop thinking about the life we used to have in Sudan and now we were in a refugee camp. Life was not worth living for me. I kept having bad dreams of the war. I could not eat. I just wanted to be alone or die.”

JERISA

A visit to the girls and women center in Zone 2 Village 5, (managed by the International Rescue Committee (IRC)), led Jerisa to meet with social workers raising awareness about the importance of mental health. Her interactions with them gave her what she describes as a life changing and eye opening experience.

Diagnosed with acute depression by a Psychiatric Clinical Officer, Jerisa was started on a treatment plan of medication and weekly counselling sessions. The sessions with a social worker helped Jerisa to understand that life could change and improve once she was equipped with positive coping mechanisms.

As Jerisa’s mental health, outlook on life and family life greatly improved; she sought financial independence. She started weaving tablecloths for sale and has been able to start up a charcoal selling business to enable her to raise more money to contribute to her family’s wellbeing.

“‘My mental health has improved, I am now able to live in harmony with my family and the rest of the community. My husband has also observed significant improvement and positive change in my life, and he has remained supportive as I am now able to manage our family misunderstandings with the problem-solving skills that I learned.’

JERISA

Jerisa is currently the secretary of Prosper Women’s Savings Group and has undertaken a short course in tailoring and weaving. She is an enterprising woman, selling her products at international events hosted in the area.

Jerisa dreams of owning a restaurant business one day because that was what she did in Sudan. But for now, she is happy to work with her skills and grow her current business.
STORY FIVE: MARY, THE SURVIVOR

How to Save A Life
Mary Awate is a 33-year-old South Sudanese refugee living in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe district. When TPO counsellors first met her, they found that she was suicidal and presented symptoms of depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

According to the TPO counsellor, Mary had resorted to heavy drinking as a way to drown out the trauma she experienced in the South Sudan civil war. Mary’s resilience rose up, she knew that drinking and neglecting her children was making things worse. She considered her situation and begun a small business to fend for her children.

“I started brewing local wine, which I would sell to make some little money. It helped to take care of me and my children.”

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“My problems started years ago in South Sudan when I lost my husband in the war, and became a single mother with no source of income. I started living under the care and support of my brother, who wasn’t employed ... but he found a way to support me and the children. But then, he died too. How could I carry on with life? I just could not see a future for me or the children.”

MARY AWATE
Despite this turnaround, Mary was silently battling depression and soon started drinking again — she even attempted to end her own life.

“I tried to end my life because for me that was the solution to my problem. But I failed. Every time I tried to kill myself, the rope would break or something.”

MARY

Fellow refugees took pity on Mary and linked her to a TPO Volunteer Psychosocial Assistant (VPA). TPO Uganda believed they could help Mary find a sustainable solution.

Through bi-weekly Psychosocial Support Sessions with TPO staff, Mary received Problem Management Plus (PM Plus). She was taught how to manage stress and take steps to consume less alcohol. She learned to seek the counsel of trusted people in the community and share her challenges with others as a coping mechanism. Mary begun to experience improved social economic functionality as the VPA continued home visits to support her transformation.

Mary’s children are also happier and continue to live with her. She has built a network of good and positive people within the community. Mary also abandoned alcohol brewing as a business- she now knows that there are other ways to make money.

“It was a long week of learning, but I was able to focus on changing the direction of my life [...] The most important thing is that I am happy and hopeful again. I no longer want to kill myself. Thank you, TPO Uganda for helping me live again.”

MARY
STORY SIX: MARGRET, A VOICE OF CHANGE

Can’t We All Just Get Along?
“The war was getting worse [and we faced many] challenges. But when my husband died in 2011, it became even more difficult, I was not able to do much to develop the home. Still, I did my best to provide for the children. But by 2017, it was impossible to do. We left the place.”

MARGRET ALOYO

Margret Aloyo has emerged as a caring and resilient voice of leadership for many refugees in Palabek Refugee Settlement. The 50-Year-old Margret was forced to give up her home and work in South Sudan, after fighting broke out and rebels began their attacks.

Before the war, Margret was a community nurse in Cigo-Boma village, Pajok sub county and had used her earnings to provide for her seven children. However, on arriving at Palabek, Margret found her true calling in her determination to unite the divided people from South Sudan and ending tribal discrimination.

“I was disappointed that our people were carrying on the same divisions that had pushed us out of our homeland.”

Margret is one of the women engaged by TPO Uganda in its efforts to help refugees overcome the stress and trauma of the war. She became a vocal advocate and mobiliser, urging fellow women to attend counselling sessions conducted by social workers. Today, Margret is a member of Health Unit Management Committee in Paluda H/C III.
Margret is a vigilant community advocate and engages with the men and women in the camp to work and live together harmoniously, irrespective of tribe. According to her, it has paid off. From these engagements, she has also come to realize that alcoholism is a big problem; leading to unnecessary fights and domestic violence; she is set to persuade men, especially the youth, to shun alcohol.

Margret has formed women’s groups that engage in farming, using land belonging to TPO Uganda within the camp. They grow vegetables and other produce, which they sell to raise money. The combined entrepreneurial spirit in Margret and these women, has led them to use the money from the sale of vegetables and produce to lease more land from local landlords in the area. In turn, they now produce even more food for their families, and are able to sell the surplus for a profit.

In her own stead, Margret has future plans of starting a profitable poultry and pig farm business. She has already procured two pigs and is constructing a chicken shelter.

Under Margret’s leadership, the women in the camp have also formed loans and savings associations, to gain access to low interest loans. Many use the loans in their farming endeavours and pay them off using proceeds from produce sales.

Margret was recently elected to represent the women in Palabek Refugee Settlement on the Refugee’s Welfare Council III (equivalent to the Local Council III in Uganda). She is also a member of the Health Unit Management Committee (HUMC) for Paluda Health Center III in Palabek. Margret has been elevated in leadership, and is using her position to amplify the voices of other women in the camp.

In the future, she would like to see TPO widen its operations, and support the women who have been empowered with startup capital — enabling them to improve their living conditions on their own terms.
TPO Uganda Head Office
Munyonyo, Wamala Close, Block 257, Plot 652.
P. O. Box 21646 Kampala, Uganda.

+256-414510256 / +256-312290313

Website: tpoug.org
Email: info@tpoug.org

Restoring Hope, Transforming lives