

Transnational Figurations of Displacement

In the shoes of a Congolese refugee: Online game helps to understand urban refugees' legal struggles

The TRAFIG team developed an interactive story-based online simulation to sensitise practitioners and the public to the multiple challenges urban refugees in Dar es Salaam face. Feedback workshops with refugees, government officials and other local stakeholders in Tanzania and with scholars and students in the Netherlands helped to refine the game and draw key lessons from the method.

Around 10,000 urban refugees live in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city, even though current national law does not allow them to live outside the refugee camps in rural areas. As only few manage to obtain permits to leave the camps, most urban refugees live covertly in the city. They have to hide their identity and therefore face precarious living conditions, barriers to education, health services and work, as well as limited prospects for the future (see [Ruhundwa et al., 2021](#)).

The 'DIGNITY Kwanza method' is an online, interactive, story-based simulation that enables participants with little or no prior knowledge of the subject matter to immediately grasp the personal, social and legal challenges that urban refugees in Dar es Salaam face daily. It also allows the 'players' to learn from the counselling work of [DIGNITY Kwanza – Community Solutions](#), a local non-profit organisation that supports marginalised and vulnerable populations in Tanzania.

Throughout the game, the player interviews urban refugees in Dar Es Salaam and must do two things:

- establish a clear picture of the needs and challenges that the refugee is facing, and
- make use of the various available tools and contacts (such as other NGOs) guiding the refugee towards regularising his/her status.

This simulation game not only fosters empathy but is also an invitation to reflect on current practices and lived realities. Its goal is to trigger critical discussion. Colleagues working at DIGNITY Kwanza, the VALUE foundation and Leiden University developed this game, which is based on empirical insights garnered during the [TRAFIG project](#). It was tested on three occasions to include stakeholders' feedback.

Feedback workshop with refugees

In November 2021, DIGNITY Kwanza and Leiden University held a [feedback session for urban refugees](#) who had participated in the interviews that formed the basis for the game. Twenty people from different walks of life joined: They aged between 18 and 65, were women and men, Congolese and Burundian nationals, people with and without a legal status. The atmosphere was convivial. This special occasion offered an opportunity to discuss issues in person in the group and in detail. We first invited the participants to look at the exhibition of ten drawings by Sapin Makengele, a Congolese painter, that were inspired by interviews conducted with urban refugees. The participants interpreted the drawings' meanings, at times even recognising elements of themselves in them. The game's lead developer presented the purpose and functioning of the simulation game with the help of the drawings that visualised the stories of three archetypal urban refugees. The refugees' feedback underlined their fear of exposure, and they welcomed the use of pseudonym names and alternative place names in the game to protect the original respondents' identity. Moreover, they appreciated that each of the three characters presented in the game was not based on an individual story only but rather represented a mix of facts based on multiple interviews. The result is technically fiction, but fiction created by combining real stories.

The Dignity Kwanza Method—Entry page of the online simulation game



Drawing by Sapin Makengele

Stakeholders' meeting

Three days after the workshop with refugees, we [presented the game to over twenty stakeholders](#), including government officials, representatives from national and international NGOs and other civil society groups working on refugee issues in Tanzania. After an introductory presentation of the game, the stakeholders split up into breakout groups to explore and discuss the method's effectiveness. Whilst playing the online simulation, the stakeholders identified and discussed their own role in the process of urban refugee management and provided concrete feedback on the stories. They believed that the method behind the development of the game, namely the use of primary sources such as the interview protocols with urban refugees provided by DIGNITY Kwanza, can be used as a model to suit the needs of other local NGOs and stakeholders in Tanzania. For organisations that already work with refugees, the game could serve as a tool for reflecting on current practices and challenges, triggering them to think of and exchange about alternative solutions.

"The toolkit can later be used as a checklist to help many practitioners in their work, not through applying the law only, but to find a middle ground and more practical solutions for urban refugees."
(Quote by a workshop participant, Nov. 2021)

Some stakeholders felt that their work was not always accurately represented. Some also highlighted the government's pivotal role in determining and legalising refugees' status.

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A [third workshop was held in March 2022 at Leiden University](#) in the Netherlands. The participants consisted of a dozen colleagues and students of the Institute for History and the Law faculty's Vollenhoven Institute and thus differed significantly from those of the previous two workshops. They were no experts but interested scholars and students. Some had working experience with forced mobility and migration matters, others did not. Interestingly, this led to a very different type of discussion. Whereas in Tanzania, refugees and stakeholders dug into the details of the game's characters, the discussion in the Netherlands touched upon more universal issues that refugees and migrants face in countries of reception. The participants compared the insights from the game to other contexts, such as South Sudanese refugees in Uganda or Sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco.

The simulation game is available in English and Swahili on the [DIGNITY Kwanza Website](#).

For further information on the situations of urban refugees in Tanzania, see Ruhundwa, J. et al. (2021). [Local connections for local solutions: Lessons learned in Tanzania](#). (TRAFIG practice note no. 8). BICC and Wilson, C. et al. (2021). [Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Tanzania: Reflections on protracted displacement and translocal connections of Congolese and Burundian refugees in Dar es Salaam](#) (TRAFIG working paper no. 8). BICC.

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