

FilmAid: Bringing Film to Refugee Camps

Sarah Gray

April 14, 2006

In the hottest, most barren region of northern Kenya, an English man with a black toothbrush mustache, a bowler hat and a short, bamboo cane stares lovingly at an apparently uninterested woman on a movie screen. Tens of thousands, sitting on sandy, pebbly ground, laugh out loud as the man mimes his way in black-and-white from one awkward situation to the next. Although it may seem strange that a silent actor from a different era and a foreign culture can draw such a crowd, Charlie Chaplin is a big hit in Kakuma refugee camp, where more than 80,000 Sudanese, Somalis and other Africans live in a constant state of uncertainty.

Humanitarian assistance typically conjures up images of aid workers doling out heavy sacks of rice and medical supplies, but one organization delivers a different kind of aid—movies. What do refugees escaping the horrors of civil war, genocide and famine care about an English man from the 1930s dancing on screen? FilmAid, a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in New York City, believes that film can provide what one Sudanese refugee called “psychological nourishment.”

FilmAid came to life in 1999 when Hollywood producer Caroline Baron heard a report on National Public Radio (NPR) about the thousands of Kosovar families forced to seek refuge in crowded camps in Macedonia. NPR reported that the refugees’ basic needs had been met but that psychological trauma, hopelessness, and boredom pervaded the camps. Baron, winner of this year’s Independent Spirit Award for the film *Capote*, traveled to Macedonia with the help of the United Nations and two other film professionals to screen films to help alleviate that despair and boredom.

In 2002, she and her crew drove around Kabul, Afghanistan in a truck with a large fold-down screen to show movies like *The Wizard of Oz* to internally displaced Afghan refugees, most of whom had never even heard music, sang a song or seen a photograph of a woman under Taliban rule. Currently, FilmAid works in some of the largest refugee camps in the world in Kenya and Tanzania, reaching cumulative audiences of nearly 900,000 a year. And they not only screen movies but teach refugees how to document their own lives through film as well.

Emmanuel Mabe, 24, who lived in Kakuma from 2001 to 2004, learned how to shoot, do sound and work as a rigger through FilmAid’s Participatory Video Program. To Mabe, working with FilmAid made living there “more tolerable than it would otherwise have been.” Like tens of thousands of others in Kakuma, Mabe’s family fled to Kenya to escape the second civil Sudanese war that has resulted in the deaths of almost two million civilians and the displacement of four million since 1983.

“My family moved to Kenya because my father wanted to shelter us kids from the aerial bombardments targeting schools in South Sudan,” Mabe said. “Above all, he wanted us to have an uninterrupted education.”

Mabe studied medicine in Nairobi before moving to Kakuma in 2001 when his funding ran out. He considers himself lucky to have received an education and is now attending the University of Toronto on a scholarship. The average stay in a refugee camp is 10 years, and for many others, the prospects are much bleaker.

A large number of relief agencies, most notably the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and other NGOs provide a broad range of services to refugees, but food, water, firewood, education, medical facilities and social services are in perpetual short supply in Kakuma due to cramped budgets and the severity of the environment.

“In many cases, refugee camps are Darwinian universes,” said Neil Boothby, a professor in the Forced Migration Studies program at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health. “There’s survival of the strongest so to speak.”

The Kenyan government forbids refugees to leave the region without permission and prohibits any form of economic activity except for a few very small shops. As little as 6 percent of refugees generate an income. Save for a handful of tiny gardens, there is no opportunity to raise crops or keep livestock. Ironically, because refugees are provided with some services by aid agencies, they are often better off than the local population. This discrepancy leads the host community to resent the refugees, who they see as encroaching on scarce resources. Near Kakuma, clashes with local Turkana tribes have led to dozens of deaths and rapes. Furthermore, inhabitants of Kakuma come from nine different countries and dozens of different ethnic groups, some of whom are at war with each other in their home countries.

FilmAid hopes to ease some of this tension. “FilmAid has changed from the point in 1999, where we would just go and show a film for relief, to really seeing the power of this medium for education and for building communities,” said Liz Silkes, the Executive Director of the NGO.

She described a conversation she had on a trip to Kakuma two weeks ago. One of their staff members, a refugee who has lived in the camp for 20 years, suggested that FilmAid work with Turkana and other Kenyans who have been killing each other over cattle rustling in the area for decades. He believes that the only way they can resolve their problems is through film.

“What’s happened is that he saw the newer community and the Dinka community come together at FilmAid screenings, and those were warring factions,” Silkes said. “But now, they come and sit together, and they laugh at the films.”

Indeed, Mabe said one of the most important achievements of FilmAid was that their work “stimulates the minds of refugees to think critically and enables them to enjoy many evenings of relaxation and laughter.”

One of the biggest issues facing refugees in Kakuma is sheer boredom. While women and girls shoulder even more work in the camps than they would in their host country—spending the entire day collecting food rations, cooking, cleaning, drawing water from the well and gathering fireweed—the opposite is true for men. The government’s restrictions on farming, raising livestock or engaging in business leave men and teenage boys with endless amounts of time on their hands.

“You find a lot of men who traditionally have types of employment they’re not able to pursue in the camps,” Boothby said. “It’s important to have something that helps to break the boredom and deal with problems associated with idle male youth.”

Over the last seven years, FilmAid has moved to showing and producing more educational films on topics central to the refugee experience such as HIV/AIDS awareness, sexual and gender-based violence, conflict resolution and landmine awareness. Silkes gave me a rundown of the latest screening she attended in Kakuma: a fictionalized portrayal about sexual abuse prevention, a nature documentary and a short piece

about landmine awareness. The evening ended with *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, a feature-length documentary that tells the story of two Sudanese teenagers' journey across Africa to suburban America. In Kakuma, where more than 70 percent of the refugees are Sudanese, the audience can obviously relate to the film. But do they choose what they watch or does FilmAid choose it for them?

"We don't go in and just screen films we like to show," Silkes said. "There's a whole process that the refugees have to go through before even participating in our programs."

When FilmAid begins working in a camp, they ask the community to select an advisory committee to discuss what types of films they want to screen and create. Silkes asserts that they strive for a diversity of opinions and the inclusion of women and minority ethnic groups, not necessarily an easy task. Even harder, she says, is simply getting them to vocalize their thoughts.

"It's very, very rare that the refugees are actually asked their opinion, that they can speak out for what they'd like to see and what their expectations are," Silkes said. "They have no opportunities for that. And when you've been in a camp for years and years, you're uncomfortable expressing your opinion, much less determining your own needs." Even the process, Silkes says, is helpful in that it creates an arena in which refugees can ask for specific things they want instead of just receiving what is handed out.

The signing of the peace accords that ended the civil war in Sudan in January 2005 raised the possibility of repatriation for some of Kakuma's residents. As genocide continues to unfold in Darfur and the peace agreement remains largely unimplemented, however, it looks like the majority of Kakuma's residents will be stuck in limbo even longer.

According to Mabe, FilmAid provides a kind of aid that "many aid workers ignore." Films obviously cannot replace refugees' basic needs of food, shelter, water and protection. But whether they're watching Charlie Chaplin or a documentary on HIV/AIDs, the moving image can alleviate and educate some of the millions of displaced persons living in makeshift homes in foreign lands around the world.