On this International Migrants Day we share stories, photos from staff on the ground, highlighting the work we do, why we do it and how it benefits the people we serve.
I was born in Yei, South Sudan, in 1978. We lived in a village but when I was five years old we moved to Yei town. My father, a pastor, was given a promotion; my mother also worked in the church. I studied in Yei town until the war [with Sudan] broke out. Around 1990, we had to go back to the village for our safety.

I had five sisters but two died, as young children, and then we lost another, so today there are only two remaining. We were also five boys but eventually they all died – I am the only remaining son. Illnesses took most of them because they could not access medical support; we only had “bush medicines”. Later on, I would also lose my mum to disease.

I was only around 13 years old but now I had to be the eldest son and take on the responsibility that came with that. There was no school in the bush so my father decided after one year that I needed to go to school on the border with Uganda. It took five to six days to walk there. On the way, I would sleep in churches or community leaders’ houses. I carried a letter, a “Departure Order”, with me that explained that I was a student travelling to school, which I showed to military at checkpoints.

I picked back up my education where it was left off at Junior 1. In 1993, the war reached the border area where I was studying so we – the students – had to walk to the refugee camp in Uganda. I took very little to the camp. I carried my documents like school certificates with me because they were my future. You can’t take mattresses or beds, I chose something that was small and would help me in life.

I was scared because I was moving alone. My family was still in Yei and there was no communication back then. They didn’t know that I had gone to the camp but they knew that my school was deserted. I was the only living son and they didn’t know where I was.

I lived in the refugee camp, which was really too big, for five years. At some point, people began moving back and forth between the camp and villages in South Sudan. Word got to my parents that I was in the camp.

I lived alone in the camp and started looking for ways to go back to school. Eventually, I began studying again but had to walk two to three hours each way, every day, to reach the school in Koboko town. I finished Senior 4 but did not have enough support to go onto Senior 6 and finish school. Everyone was struggling in the camp and I was already in my twenties.

War had interrupted my education many times and now it was ending it. While I was still at school in the camp, I had started writing letters to my family. In one of theirs to me, my father asked me to come home on my next break, which I did. They hadn’t seen me in so long and wanted to be sure that I was ok.

So, I made it back to the village to see my family. We hugged each other. We cried as well, tears of joy and sorrow. Joy because I was alive and sorrow because I was alone for so long. I stayed in the village for a month and then went back to the camp for my final year of school.

After ending school, I came back to South Sudan. But I said, “This cannot be the end of my life – I still need to make something of my future”. I told my dad that I wanted to go to town and make something of myself. I didn’t finish my education but I knew that there were other things I could do.

I went back to Koboko because I knew people there, but it was hard to get a job. I took any opportunity I could, including going from compound to compound cleaning toilets. I managed to save up a little bit of money and went to another town in Uganda and got some casual work with an international company that was building bridges.

My life began to change at this point. And in my mind, I knew that I wanted to do mechanics or driving. I started driving school there around the year 2000. Once I got my driving permit, it was something to start my life with. I came back to Yei and got a job driving with a humanitarian organization. They promoted me to head of drivers and logistics.

When I heard about the job in IOM, it was still hard to send things from Yei to Juba but somehow I managed to get in my application. I started with IOM as a driver in 2007 and was promoted to head of drivers in 2008.

Although I am older, I am still the only remaining elder son and have all the responsibility that comes with that. In Africa, we help all family members as if they were immediate family. Today, I am supporting my elderly father, the children left by my brothers and my own daughter, who is in school.

I am now going on 11 years with IOM and am extremely proud of this. I have a really great team throughout South Sudan. I have amazing memories of helping movements of internally displaced people in 2007, as well as the repatriation of Congolese refugees in 2008.

I remember when IOM South Sudan was just two small containers but a lot has changed now.
When I first started driving water trucks around Juba, the communities would ask, “Why is this woman driving a truck?”

I was born in 1984 in a village 30 miles from Yei town. When I was eight, my father took one of my sisters and me by bicycle to a school on the border with Uganda. We stayed there for a year before we had to move to the refugee camp in Uganda. We lived with our aunts, uncles and cousins in the camp, as our parents were still back in South Sudan.

I spent three years in the camp, until my father died. His appendix burst and there were no doctors. So, I had to come back to the village to be with my mother, who was a midwife. A year later, we lost her too.

So, I went back to the camp.

It took six days to walk there from Yei. When I got back to the camp, I stopped going to school – I was only in Primary 3 – because there was not enough support. If we needed a little bit of money for something small like soap, then we would have to go collect firewood from the forest and make charcoal to sell. It could be dangerous.

Three years later, my uncle took me to Koboko but then he was in an accident. He died and life became very difficult. I had to start looking for money to support my three sisters. I began making alcohol and tried to get other jobs like washing things and collecting water.

I was coming up on 18 years of age and knew that I couldn’t finish school so I left the camp.

I felt so bad. My father was dead. My mother was dead. My uncle had taken me and then he died.

I eventually got a job on a hospital compound and was making enough to help my sisters. I worked there until 2005. I then became a cook and would cook food for a children’s feeding centre.

I checked my mind again and knew I wanted to go back to learning. I travelled to Kampala and enrolled in an English course and driving school. I didn’t have enough money so I went to Juba and worked in a market before I could finish school.

My first driving job was delivering water in Juba. There had been many women in driving school in Kampala but then there were not many driving trucks in South Sudan.

In 2012, after working for an international organization for a while in Juba, I joined IOM and now have been with them for six years.

Driving in Juba can be tough – the roads are dangerous and motorcyclists can be careless. In the field, it can be a lot worst. The cars get stuck because of the conditions, especially in the rainy season, and we have to get them out without damaging them.

I am happy with the job I am doing as a driver, especially because it means that my daughters can go to school.
Jamal Julius, IOM South Sudan Accounting Clerk

I started with IOM three years ago as a gardener. In 2017, I was promoted to compound supervisor for the office in Juba. Today, I work in the finance department.

While working as the compound supervisor, I started studying for a diploma in accountancy with Juba University so that I could get a job like I have now. It was hard to work and go to class at the same time, but we made an arrangement. I used to work from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on certain days to compensate for the hours when I was in school. Although it still wasn’t that easy.

However, something the person who sponsored me said kept me going: “Jamal, everyone likes your work outside and imagine what you could do inside an office, since you are such a hard worker.”

Every time someone at work would ask me about my studies, it encouraged me to work harder and do better.

I was born in Kajo Keji and became a refugee when I was only two years old. All my childhood was spent in a refugee camp in Uganda. I lost my dad when I was in Primary 6; it was really a struggle. Life was so hard in terms of school fees, food, shelter and even sometimes education.

My mother remarried and had more children. I became the eldest of six. When she lost her second husband, I became the one supporting the whole family.

After Senior 4 [the second to last grade in secondary school], I came back to Juba. And before joining IOM, I was worked on the gardens in a hotel for four years.

I had already come so far; I knew I could go further.

The professional change from manual work to accountancy has been great so far. And I wouldn’t be able to do it without the support of my colleagues and supervisors.

Looking to the future, I really want to work hard and eventually upgrade my diploma to a bachelor’s degree in accountancy. Then I want to see how I can help others, as I was helped.
I joined the Migration Health Unit’s rapid response team, as a midwife, in 2014. I had trained in comprehensive nursing, which means I studied different areas like pediatrics, medical, surgical, psychiatric and midwifery. We would provide health and nutrition support to displaced people, who were living outside of the Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites. When we would receive information about people being displaced, we would respond quickly. I did that during 2014 and 2015.

In 2016, I joined my current role. It meant I didn’t go out of Juba as much as before, but it was a sort of a promotion. I now provide overall support to the Migration Health Unit, including for the warehouse, procurement and human resources. My favourite part of the job is reporting. I even went to Nairobi for two weeks to take part in a monitoring and evaluation training, which built up my skills.

I was born in South Sudan in Torit. During the war, my mum and uncle took my sister and me to Uganda. My uncle carried me because I was very small. I studied primary and secondary in the refugee camp. Then I went to a school of nursing in Uganda. In my mind, I wanted to become a doctor, but I couldn’t make it because I didn’t have enough support.

My mum did not go to school. She was illiterate, but she supported me as much she as she could. She used to struggle a lot to provide the basics for us. She would do some small businesses like brewing local alcohol to get some money to pay for us to go to school. Because of her, both my sister and I got an education. And my sister now works in finance.

I can see a big difference between my mother’s life and mine. I do not have to struggle as much to provide for my children but, like her, I do work hard. They do not have to worry about whether or not they will finish school because of the fees.

Now, I am happy with where I am. I have three children: a boy and twin girls. With this responsibility, I cannot go fully into more studies, but next year I will enroll in a distance-learning course on public health. That is my dream now.
When I was younger, my aunt had a not-for-profit where she would bring groups of children with cancer to Disney World from Venezuela. Helping her was my first experience volunteering.

At the same time, I had also started working at an after school daycare programme. I knew I loved working with children and wanted to help people who needed it. This is where the idea to pursue social work started. But when I started university, moving from Miami to Tallahassee, and took math for non-majors, I realized I really liked and was good at it. I wanted to find a way to incorporate that into my career and social work did not offer that opportunity.

My other aunt was an engineer and encouraged me to join the engineering field, which was not common for women. After some research, I quickly took interest and pursued industrial engineering. I wanted to prove to myself I could do it and, although I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to, I knew engineering would be a great background for any future career.

The idea of working in humanitarian logistics came when I was living in Tanzania serving in the Peace Corps, teaching math. There, I met people working for the World Food Programme (WFP) delivering food to remote locations. I learned about their work and figured it was the perfect combination of knowledge from my studies in engineering, specifically regarding optimizing operations, as well as the skills I had developed as a Peace Corps volunteer.

Getting my family’s approval working in this field has always been a challenge. While I was in Tanzania, my father and sister came to visit me. My father was a bit confused about the living conditions I had chosen. I got the impression that, in his mind, he had worked hard to give me a comfortable life, as an immigrant to the United States, and now I was living in a place possibly similar to where he had grown up. Today, after many discussions, he gets my reasons for choosing this field of work and accepts it more.

My parents are both from Venezuela. In her late twenties, my mom had been traveling back and forth from Caracas to Miami visiting her sister. My dad was working for a Venezuelan newspaper distributor in Miami. They met, fell in love and got married in a small ceremony. They decided to stay in Miami and start their lives in the land of opportunities as they saw it. I used to go back to Venezuela quite a bit but haven’t been in 10 or 12 years due to the deteriorating condition of the country. I dream of going back one day to the happy, stable country Venezuela once was, to connect with my roots.

Growing up in Miami was different from the experience other children of immigrants might have elsewhere in the US. In Miami, Latins [people from Latin America] are the majority – all of my friends’ parents were from Latin America and our spoken language at home and to each other was, for the most part, Spanish. But my parents do call themselves Americans now – they’ve been in the US the same about of time if not more than they lived in Venezuela. Even though my dad still doesn’t speak perfect English, really in Miami you don’t need it!

So, after Peace Corps, I pursued my Masters in Logistics & Supply Chain Management and, in my final year, I started working in a warehouse, as I couldn’t afford to finish the degree without getting a job. I worked the night shift from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., almost every day for a year. After applying to various jobs in the humanitarian logistics field, I came across a warehouse manager job with IOM in Micronesia. I joined the Organization in 2016 – 17 months after a typhoon had destroyed about 90 per cent of the structures on two of the island states. We were storing and distributing construction materials to over 15 different islands, helping communities rebuild their houses and public infrastructures destroyed by the typhoon. When that project ended, I joined IOM South Sudan, also as the warehouse manager.

It is an exhausting job and the approximately 90 people I manage have to do such a physically demanding job by carrying heavy items that can be, at times, over 50kg. It is tough, especially in South Sudan’s heat. But the most rewarding part of the job is supporting the capacity building of the casual labourers on our team. I strive to get them the opportunities they deserve. They don’t get a lot of attention, as logistics is just seen as the support, but many of the casual labourers have been with IOM for years and have the capacity and potential to continue developing in their careers. My next plan is computer lessons!
Adele Hakizimana – Head of IOM Burundi Field Office in Ruyigi

Adele Hakizimana is the head of IOM Burundi’s field office in Ruyigi. She has worked in four different projects since joining IOM in 2016. Below is her story in her own words.

“I gained experience in community mobilization, on peaceful coexistence, shelter kits and NFI distribution, cash transfer and construction.

I feel motivated to contribute to improving the living conditions of vulnerable populations in general, and women in particular, because I am aware that women are the pillars of the household. When a woman earns money, the whole family benefits. I also know that resources are limited for women, as they are not able to find work easily as a man.

One day I walked for more than 20 kilometres in the steep, muddy hills of Gitaza during the validation of land plots for beneficiaries who were being relocated following the decommissioning of Burundi’s IDP camps. It was tiring but very rewarding, because the goal was to find a safe place for shelters that would not be swept away by floods.”

Pirce Altinok – Resilience and Reintegration Officer

Pirce Altinok, a Turkish national, has worked in Burundi since 2018 as a Resilience and Reintegration Officer. In this position, she has experienced firsthand how Quick Impact Projects can benefit migrants and communities. Prior to joining IOM Burundi, Pirce worked for IOM Turkey where she specialized in livelihoods programmes.

“Recently, I visited one of the completed projects in Giharo Commune, Ruyigi province, where a community chose to construct a bridge that would enable them to transport their goods more easily and provide quicker access to a medical centre by car. Previously, they had been using a makeshift bridge from trees, which was dangerous for children and did not allow vehicles to cross. Meeting with members of the community was particularly rewarding, as they shared with me how various groups of people came together to construct this bridge and how it has improved their lives. It reminded me of the importance of our work in supporting migrants and the communities who welcome them.

I am passionate about my work, and I believe in the international humanitarian standards that we (IOM) abide by.”
Since joining IOM Burundi in 2016, Bonaventure has worked on a variety of shelter and livelihood projects, including a community stabilization project, the decommissioning of Burundi’s four camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and projects designed to support migrants with shelter/NFI. His current project focuses on reintegration assistance for returnees from Tanzania and host communities, including shelter and NFI support.

“I have two motivations: the first is to give my contribution to alleviate the suffering of migrants (returnees and internally displaced persons). The second is that I hope to leave a legacy so that one day, someone can say: ‘He’s the one who did that.’”

My most memorable experience with IOM as team leader is how we successfully managed the relocation of 722 displaced families from the Gitaza, Cashi and Gatumba IDP camps in just three months, and especially the strategy to build 159 temporary shelters in Muhuta commune and Bugarama in 15 just days.”
Benson Tumuheki, Operations Assistant Entebbe International Airport

Benson Tumuheki works in Uganda as an Operations Assistant at the Entebbe International Airport. In this photo, he is supporting a group of Congolese refugees going through the airport to take their flight to the United States of America where they will be resettled. In another picture (1B), he is seen with a Belgium-based father who had just been reunited with his daughters by IOM Uganda and IOM Brussels.

Tumuheki joined IOM Uganda in July 2016. “It is my goal to use my professional skills, experience and educational qualifications to contribute to the success and growth of the organization I serve to be highly competent, reliable, transparent and effective,” he says.

Tumuheki’s job entails liaising with airlines regarding pre-check-in procedures and coordinating transportation for migrants between IOM’s Transit Centre and Entebbe International Airport. He says seeing children leaving Uganda and being resettled is the happiest part of his job.

Bosco Okwonga, Operations & Admin Assistant Bosco

IOM Uganda Operations & Admin Assistant Bosco Okwonga (Left) and colleague Abas Ali pick up a newly evacuated baby from a boat in the western district of Kikuube. Based at the Kyangwali Refugee Settlement, Okwonga has been with IOM since September 2010. In April, Okwonga was part of the IOM, UNHCR and Government team that supported the evacuation of at least 456 Congolese refugees who were stranded on remote landing sites on Lake Albert. They were later transported by bus to Kyangwali settlement.

Asked what drives him, Okwonga says: “The passion to see results – I feel very happy when I see that my work is impacting people’s lives”.

In Picture 2A, Okwonga and colleagues help ashore a boat carrying the evacuated refugees.

Yuji Kawai, United Nations Volunteer

United Nations Volunteer Yuji Kawai teaches refugees in Palorinya settlement about bucket irrigation.

Yuji joined IOM Uganda in April 2018 and is responsible for monitoring and evaluation on the WASH team. “I work with the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) unit and I assess projects in West Nile and South West Uganda. I support these projects from Kampala. My main responsibility is monitoring and evaluation to track activities and conduct surveys.”

Still, he misses his family back in Japan. “I left my family home in Japan, so there’s not many times I go back. The time difference (6 hours) is large, so there is a communication difficulty with my family. I miss my bicycle and riding by the river. I don’t know the roads here, so I can’t ride. All in all, I love my experience here.”

Peter Nzabanita, WASH specialist

IOM Uganda WASH specialist Peter Nzabanita (Right) is pictured with his colleague Julius Isingoma, who is based in the northwestern Uganda district of Moyo. Isingoma oversees IOM Uganda’s WASH operations in Palorinya Refugee Settlement.
Susan Amariat
Susan Amariat is a nurse with IOM in Uganda. She has been working with IOM since August 2016. Amariat is motivated by the response she gets from the people she serves, mostly refugees. Her work includes screening and surveillance of refugees due for resettlement to third countries, vaccination, treatment and follow up of chronic cases, as well as psychosocial support.

Mathew Okitel Elungat
Mathew Okitel Elungat is the project assistant for WASH in Kyangwali refugee settlement in western Uganda. He has been with IOM since March 2018, when he joined from Oxfam. He works closely with the community to promote sanitation and hygiene, and he is an active member of the WASH coordination forum in the settlement. He says he feels most motivated when supporting the benefiting community, especially vulnerable, to get involved in solving water and sanitation challenges.

Zainab Osman
IOM Uganda Transit Centre Assistant Zainab Osman screens luggage of airport-bound refugees. This picture was taken at the IOM Uganda Transit Centre, which Zaimabu heads. She and her team ensure that all refugees being resettled via the centre are well taken care of. Now in her third year at IOM Uganda, Osman supervises and oversees the day-to-day running of the centre. She also prepares for beneficiary arrivals to the transit centre and coordinates with the movement and medical units during the resettlement of refugees. Asked what drives her in her work, Osman points at a passion for customer care – ensuring that the clients get the best possible service.

Micheal Kisitu
IOM Uganda Project Assistant Micheal Kisitu (Left) explains a point to a Uganda Police commissioner, Hadijah Namutebi, during an activity of the Strengthening Social Cohesion and Stability in Slum Populations Project, funded by the European Union. Kisitu joined IOM in March 2017 and is often seen in informal settlements of the Ugandan capital, Kampala, working with young adults in slums. A hands-on operator, Kisitu says he is driven by the quest for efficiency – meeting deadlines, learning new things, innovation and creativity in project implementation.
“I am passionate about young people and I often work to make sure that they have spaces and opportunities to use their talents, explore new opportunities and improve themselves and their communities,” Kisitu says.