Imagine a situation where people are forced to flee war, violence, persecution and abuse. They lose both homes and loved ones, live in fear, as well as uncertainty. Survival often becomes a preserve for the fittest.

Imagine if the person fleeing for their life is just a child. What would you do? David Sebit, 52, chose to take care of such children.

The children Red South Sudan war that broke out in December 2013 between president Salva Kiir and his deputy, Dr Riek Machar.

Psychological concerns
Sebit who arrived in Uganda on October 17, last year, says the children under his care are unpredictable, moody and, sometimes, hard to manage.

"Fostering is not for the faint-hearted. Many times, the children are so silent that you have no idea what is going on in their minds. They could be so unpredictable that you have to find means of coping with their behaviour," he said.

Sebit, a former radio repairer in Yei state, South Sudan and now living in Omugo refugee settlement in Arua district, said he found the children wandering while looking for safety.

"When I asked them where they were coming from, they told me Morobo county and that they had walked through Sali Yamusalu at the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo and their legs were swollen. I was compelled to give them the comfort and hope they were yearning for," he said.

He said sometimes, he feels helpless when the children demand more than he can offer.

"They think I am deliberately not giving them enough, the way their biological parents would have done. I treat them as my own, but they sometimes develop mood swings," the former radio repairer said.

Training
He said he has been able to cope after attaining extra parental care skills from the Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI) Foundation.

"I have been equipped with meditation and storytelling skills which have helped me to live in harmony with the children I foster. I use the skills to ensure they forget about anything related to war. They are traumatised because some of them witnessed their parents being shot dead," he said.

He says when peace prevails in South Sudan, he will return with all the children and help them to have a fresh start to life.

Sebit is not the only one fostering refugee children. Besta Aji, 50, a widow, is fostering seven children.

Aji says life has been tough ever since she crossed into Uganda. She says her only two sons were captured and has no idea if they are still alive or dead.

"I am putting my hope in God believing one day, I will find my children alive. The government soldiers took them to fight. A war is a situation between life and death," she said.

She, however, says she does not regret taking care of the seven children because they keep her company and give her the satisfaction of motherhood.

"I knew I was the only person they could count on for their survival and protection in the new environment and country," she said.

The foster parents also ensure that their children acquire education and that they are supported and guided in any way possible, to help them fit into the new environment.

"The attention from their parents, their interaction with other refugees who, sometimes, do not share languages with the host community, makes us have a lesser sense of belonging here," he said.

Challenges
Some of the challenges that implementing partners and the fostering parents are finding are self-reliance and drug abuse.

"We have to keep a close eye on them as they move around the camp. They interact with other refugees who, sometimes, misinform them on what is happening back home in South Sudan. Unfortunately, some of these refugees have false information. They tell them stories that are not true, for instance that peace and stability has been restored in their homeland. Because of the lies, they are lured into engaging in risky behaviour," she said.

Sebit said he is not about to lose the children because he treasures them as his own.

"If they disappear, I will die a sad man. They are now part of my family. I am ever worried about them because they have no idea of what is happening back home. I have to safeguard them," he said.

Coping
With the mood swings and hunger, Sebit prefers to talk to his children after having a meal because that is the time they are relaxed and willing to listen to his advice.

He says he lives in a grass-thatched house having given his foster children a house roofed with iron sheets.

Solution
Maria Gaudenzi, the programme manager for AVSI, said most of the children are traumatised and can hardly express themselves because they do not share languages with the host communities.

"Well, this is the scary reality for millions of refugee children who find themselves in a new country. In order for children to feel included in their new homes, schools and communities, the Government and implementing partners must have incorporated programmes that foster harmony among children from different backgrounds. Small steps, such as these, will prevent societal exclusion and help make the transition to a new life easier," she said.

Gaudenzi said they have put in place a recreation centre which has helped assimilate the youth by improving the living conditions of the South Sudanese refugees and the host communities.

They participate in games, such football, playing chess and other activities to keep them away from engaging in risky behaviour," she said.