

Externalizing Asylum

A compendium of scientific knowledge

EU funding, UNHCR disconnect and the limits of Uganda's settlement-based refugee response

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Uganda is today Africa's topmost refugee-hosting country, with over 1.5 million refugees mostly settled across the country's thirteen refugee settlements. The country's settlement-based refugee hosting model has won widespread acclaim undergirded by substantive external funding, not least from European Union (EU) donor countries. Basing on an ethnographic fieldwork involving refugees who had sought or are seeking asylum in Uganda's urban spaces, this paper demonstrates how EU funding targets, coupled with UNHCR policy implementation choices utterly disconnected from existing realities-on-ground, have shaped Uganda's settlement-based refugee response to its limits. The paper concludes that, if going unchecked, EU funding and UNHCR implementation would accordingly treat refugees seeking asylum in Uganda – and by extension across the global South – not as 'effective persons of concern' but rather as 'persons to whom it may concern' as the continent and the world at large further urbanise amid growing ecological upset.

Introduction

As host to the largest refugee population on the African continent and as one of the countries piloting the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), Uganda offers an outstanding case of scrutiny of refugee response alongside externally sourced funding. The country has particularly received widespread praise for its refugee legal and policy frameworks, especially *prima facie* refugee recognition and settlement-based refugee care.

With substantive funding from the European Union (EU) donor countries and the overarching caretaking role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), humanitarian assistance for refugees in Uganda is largely limited to established refugee settlements in the remote parts of the country's north, north-west, mid-west, and south-west. Starting in October 2021, Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) together with the UNHCR began undertaking a joint verification and profiling of all refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda to assess demographics, vulnerabilities and special needs of this population.^[1]

While much is known about institutionalised care for Uganda's *prima facie* refugees domiciled in designated refugee settlements, there has been scant information about refugees who are self-settled or settling in urban

areas in general, and particularly those residing in the recently gazetted cities of Uganda (Arua, Fort Portal, Gulu, Jinja, Lira, Mbale, Mbarara, Masaka, and Soroti) besides Kampala. Taking a closer look at the EU funding for refugee humanitarian care in Uganda particularly since the 2016 debacle in South Sudan, this paper seeks to expose the limits of Uganda's settlement-based humanitarian assistance to refugees and asylum seekers. The perils of this funded policy choice for the country's refugee response will be hidden in plain sight as Uganda, like other African countries, further urbanises amid mounting ecological crises in rural areas.

Note on the fieldwork and research ethics

Conceptually, the fieldwork for this study sought to examine the tenacity of Uganda's settlement-based refugee response model in view of the growing urbanisation wave, on the one hand, and the mounting ecological crises in the country's rural areas, on the other. Respondents, in the main, included those so-called 'self-settled urban refugees' in the cities of Arua, Mbarara and Kampala, their local hosts, and the humanitarian (state and non-state) workers who support them. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out with asylum seekers and refugees who took part in this study, while their local hosts and humanitarian workers/social service providers were engaged by way of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs), all between May and July 2022. A few asylum seekers and refugees identified as respondent-outliers during those FGDs were also selected for follow-up interviews.

The FGDs were both age- and gender-disaggregated, and in some instances, also nationality-disaggregated. While in Mbarara City a great many asylum seekers and refugees were Congolese (from the Banyamulenge community) and in Arua City predominantly South Sudanese (from Dinka and Nuer communities), those in Kampala City were from different nationalities (Burundian, Congolese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Rwandan, Somali, South Sudanese and Sudanese). Furthermore, FGD respondents included men and women (cisgender), as well as one gender non-conforming group, all of whom were between the ages of 19 and 65. IDI respondents too were of different age brackets and gender, and with various professional experiences, stemming from both state, non-state and inter-state agencies on the humanitarian spectrum. Overall, the fieldwork engaged a total of sixty-two (62) self-settled asylum seekers and refugees; eighteen (18) state/government humanitarian actors, who included representatives from the OPM, respective city councils, and the Police; twelve (12) non-state/non-government humanitarian actors, who included representatives from UNHCR Uganda and EU Delegation in Uganda; and nine (9) Ugandan hosts, who included chairpersons of the Local Council I/Ward in the selected cities as well as Ugandan landlords/ladies.

Because the subject matter of this study did include detailed narratives about experiences/attempts of exclusion/discrimination and further vulnerability in such contexts of asylum, it was here anticipated that fieldwork for this study could potentially trigger varying degrees of discomfort on the part of participants. I thus ensured that participants were provided with information on accessing relevant support services as stipulated in the formulated humanitarian referral pathways. I particularly foregrounded the fairly comprehensive outreach programme of mental health and psychosocial wellbeing offered by the Refugee Law Project. Suffice it to add that fieldwork for this study received ethical research approval and clearance respectively from the UNCST-accredited Research Ethics Committee of TASO Uganda (TASO REC) and the research accrediting authority in Uganda, namely the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST) for a period of one calendar year (May 2022 – May 2023).

Uganda's two-pronged approach to refugee hosting

Uganda's experience in managing settlement-based refugees dates back to the 1940s when the country hosted Europeans displaced by the Second World War while still under British colonial rule.^[2] These were mainly Polish refugees (about 7,000 in number) that were settled in Nyabyeya Camp in Masindi District and Kojia Camp in Mukono District between 1942 and 1947. In the run-up to independence, Uganda further experienced several influxes of refugees from neighbouring countries. By 1955 approximately 178,000 Sudanese had fled to Uganda^[3]; in response, the Uganda Protectorate Government enacted the *Control of Refugees from the Sudan Ordinance* in 1955.^[4] This served as the country's first-ever legislative instrument for refugee status determination and subsequent refugee protection. Five years later, in view of growing political instability in Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo and the corresponding need for a single legal regime to govern the management of all refugee populations in Uganda, the Uganda Protectorate Government in July 1960 repealed the Control of Refugees from Sudan Ordinance and replaced it with the Control of Alien Refugees Ordinance (CARO). The latter soon turned into the Control of Aliens and Refugees Act (CARA) after Uganda's accession to independence.^[5]

The CARA remained in effect for the next 44 years, unchanged even after Uganda's accession to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Stateless People on 27 September 1976. In 2006, Uganda enacted a new legal regime, the Refugees Act.^[6] This came into force in 2008 and was operationalised by the Refugee Regulations of 2010. Though not without critics^[7], the Act departs from the old legal regime in important ways and has been hailed as a remarkably progressive example of national legislation on refugee matters.^[8] Most notably, Article 30 of the 2006

Refugees Act affords refugees the right to freedom of movement within the borders of the country. Article 29 of the Act further spells out several rights, including refugees' rights to own property, engage in subsistence agriculture, industry, handicrafts and commerce, establish commercial and industrial companies (according to domestic law), practice a profession according to qualifications, and access employment opportunities.

In an interview with the Acting Commissioner for Refugees at the OPM Department of Refugees, the latter underscored that "all recognised refugees are special guests of the state,"^[9] and thus deserving of special care throughout their asylum stay in Uganda as the host country. This, in principle, should hold true regardless of where these recognised refugees desire to live within the borders of Uganda. Yet, despite its expansive definition of refugee in the Uganda refugee legal and regulatory frameworks, the funding for refugee response in Uganda—the one mostly from the EU—has significantly conditioned a fairly generous regime of humanitarian care for *prima facie* refugees and a relatively restricted range of refugee rights and protection-enhancing considerations for those granted refugee status by way of individual refugee status determination (IRSD). Where *prima facie* recognised refugees are, in the main, hosted in designated rural-based refugee settlements, IRSD-recognised refugees are almost always expected to stay within the country's urban areas.

Uganda's preference for the settlement-based approach to refugee protection is therefore not just self-evident but rather contingent upon the externally sourced funding, especially from the EU Trust Fund for Africa. To EU officials as to UNHCR representatives, the rural-based refugee residing in the designated refugee resettlement is the ideal person of concern. To paraphrase Turner, this settlement-hosted refugee is to Uganda as to the rest of the humanitarian world the proper "uncontroversial object of humanitarian concern."^[10] He or she – and always assumed in a clear-cut heteronormative sense of gender – is granted access to specific humanitarian food and non-food items, as well as assistance programmes among other things for their empowerment and gradual self-reliance.

Meanwhile, the opportunities available to these refugees in settlements, who are gradually expected to become self-reliant, have not adequately improved their life circumstances. Most noticeable, instead, is the fact that the remote locations of these settlements do contribute to physical, social and economic separation from the rest of the country, while humanitarian and government agencies enjoy control over the settlements' inhabitants as well as direct access to them.^[11] Consequently, these settlement-hosted refugees, in the words of Krause, quickly turn into "protection objects."^[12] Those who, for various reasons and motivations, seek to break away from such 'containment politics of refugee protection' by seeking refuge in cosmopolitan urban spaces will have to face often insurmountable challenges to a dignified asylum.

EU Funding through UNHCR Uganda

In the eye of UNHCR Uganda, refugees who cannot present evidence of formal employment and fixed residency outside designated refugee settlements are deemed unable to sustain themselves in urban areas and thus strongly discouraged from remaining there. And in the wisdom of funders of UNHCR Uganda, most notably the EU Delegation in Uganda, these refugees ought to wait – going through self-reliance graduating projects in designated refugee settlements – until they can prove their self-sufficiency to relocate to urban spaces for their asylum. How long is this waiting period and what is to happen during this waiting period are the two issues of interest of EU funding to the Uganda state through UNHCR.

In 2014, EU donor countries launched the Khartoum Process, which involved cooperation with East and Horn of Africa countries aimed at migration management. Of this Process, the Better Migration Management (BMM) programme, to which Uganda was and still is a privileged party, was set up in 2016 and financed by the EU Trust Fund for Africa to the tune of 40 million Euros.^[13] One of the four key components of this EU-funded BMM programme consists of “protecting refugees and migrants, strengthening migrant rights, improving identification of individuals and promoting voluntary return and reintegration within the region as well as supporting stranded immigrants who cannot proceed further nor return to their countries of origin.” Still, in 2016, the EU further funded Uganda’s Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA) to foster sustainable livelihoods for refugees and host communities. The Agenda, primarily envisaged to deliver tangible benefits for settlement-based refugees in Uganda, was also meant to be integrated into the government’s second National Development Plan, aimed at driving Uganda’s plans towards middle income status by 2040.

Lastly, the UNHCR – with substantive funding from the EU – took Uganda as Africa’s chosen site for piloting the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) starting in 2016. The Framework’s objectives are four-fold, viz. (i) to ease pressure on the host country, (ii) to enhance refugee self-sufficiency, (iii) to expand access to third-country solutions, and (iv) to support conditions in countries of origin. A solidarity summit was subsequently held in Kampala the following year, in 2017, aimed at fundraising for the kickstart of the Framework’s first two objectives. At that summit, pledges of 2 billion US dollars were made. Some 350 million US dollars were raised against the 869 million US dollars requested for Uganda’s settlement-based refugee livelihoods programme. EU donor countries accounted for 82% of the pledges. The following year saw fulfilment of some pledges, although, by October 2018, still 58% of the UNHCR’s estimated budget for Uganda reportedly remained unfunded.^[14] While the earmarked 44 million Euros from the EU Trust

Fund for Africa, aimed to foster greater economic and employment opportunities and to strengthen refugee livelihoods in the East and Horn of Africa, significantly pale in comparison to EU funding for (forced) migration management priorities elsewhere on the continent, Uganda's settlement-based model for refugee protection remains the flagship policy preference for UNHCR Uganda and its funders.

Yet, the demographics of forced migrants in Uganda's refugee settlements today (majority of them are young people below the age of 30) coupled with the fast-paced urbanisation drive across much of sub-Saharan Africa (projected at 68% by 2050 from 56% in 2021) make urban spaces the most attractive destination for asylum for Uganda's forced migrants. What is more, the decreasing financial resources from EU donor-countries in the wake of competing attention to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza on the one hand, and continued influxes from the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa on the other, make the current preference for Uganda's settlement-based approach to refugee protection even more untenable in the mid- to long-term. Uganda's Cabinet Minister of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees captured gloom hovering over the settlement-based model in the following words:

"[...] Just imagine, in 2013, as a ministry we were managing some 500,000 refugees with a budget of USD 300 million per annum. Today [2022], we're managing over 1.5 million refugees with a budget of USD 120 million per annum. Anyone can do the maths and appreciate the magnitude of the challenges before us. Let's also be mindful of the fact that land is a finite good, and Uganda's own demographics are bulging. All this means hosting refugees in those settlement arrangements may not be sustainable. Perhaps, it is high time to start thinking of putting up high-rises for these refugees, that is, going vertical instead of keeping horizontal in terms of accommodation for the refugees... The UNHCR should here accompany the government in investing more and more in urban asylum, in arrangements that would exert much less pressure on land..."^[15]

In May 2021, again with substantive funding from the EU, the government of Uganda launched a multi-partner plan known as the 'Jobs and Livelihoods Integrated Response Plan (JLIRP) for refugees and host communities in Uganda' in line with the ideals of the Global Compact on Refugees. The plan envisions self-reliant and resilient refugees and host community households in refugee-hosting districts by 2025. It emphasises increasing economic opportunities by strengthening market systems for both refugees and hosts in refugee-hosting districts of Uganda. A jobs-and-livelihoods integrated response plan beyond the confines of rural-based refugee settlements is perhaps what is most urgently needed in order to lessen the burden of Uganda's current settlement-based approach to refugee protection.

The limits of the settlement-based model

The 2006 Refugees Act states that an asylum seeker or recognised refugee who wishes to stay in a place “other than the designated places or areas [refugee settlement] may apply to the Commissioner for permission to reside in any other part of Uganda” (Section 44(2) of the Act). In practice, however, and especially given the right to freedom of movement also enshrined in the very Act (Section 30(1)), there have since been many instances of cross-over mobilities by *prima facie* recognised refugees from designated refugee settlements to urban areas on the one hand, and from individual-status-determination recognised refugees self-settled in urban areas to the rural-based designated refugee settlements.^[16] Previous studies that inquired into these cross-over mobilities from refugee settlements to urban areas have principally foregrounded ‘economic/livelihoods reasons’ as the chief motivation of change in residence from a refugee settlement to an urban area (city, municipality or town) and vice versa.^[17]

This paper nonetheless reveals a plurality of reasons given by the concerned refugees themselves, accounting for their key motivations to migrate to urban spaces—away from designated settlements—for asylum in spite of the UNHCR-applauded and EU-funded settlement-based refugee response model. The accounts of reasons for refugees’ self-settlement in urban areas were diverse and context-specific. These ranged from some hard-to-bear ecological and social conditions in refugee settlements, self-propelled local integration away from direct state and society’s gazes, to protection and specific security concerns.

Socio-ecological push factors

The ecology within which some refugee settlements are located was reported to constitute one important push factor, causing some refugees’ relocation to urban spaces for asylum. During an FGD with six Congolese female refugees residing in Mbarara City, the following revelation was made by one of them:

“From the transit centre where my family and I first settled upon crossing the Congo border into Uganda, we were then transferred to Nakivale Refugee Settlement. We received good reception there and so many humanitarian agencies cared for us in terms of shelter, water and food. But we were almost always sick. My young children were particularly affected by constant infections from malaria to typhoid fever. That place is just infested with mosquitos and flies of all kinds. And the weather there can be

unbearable for us who come from and are used to moderate temperatures from the hills in eastern DRC. We couldn't put up with those high temperatures in Nakivale, which are about 40 degrees Celsius on average throughout the year. Being endemic to malaria and fevers for us, we decided to leave Nakivale for the sake of our health. That's principally why we came here [Mbarara City]. It's better here, for I can spend up to a year without me or my children falling sick.”^[18]

In another FGD with refugee youth from different nationalities residing in Arua City, a similar narrative was echoed concerning their experiences in settlements across the West Nile region:

“Bidi-Bidi Refugee Settlement is outstandingly hot; during days it gets so hot that one is left with no option other than look for a shade under a leafy tree and sleep. Yet, even trees there are rare to find. And when it rains the place gets humid, muddy and swampy, making physical movement hard. No wonder, throughout the year people there, young and old as well as male and female, keep lining up to health centres for medical treatment. I think the hot and humid climate there is a major contributing factor to the ill-health of refugees settled there. And the fact that there is no allowance for building permanent or semi-permanent structures in the refugee settlement, living in those temporary housing structures makes it even more conducive for diseases. That's why we are here in Arua, and only go back to the settlement where we are registered as refugees when it is most necessary. Hard as it is, renting here in the city has saved us a lot from being perennially sick in the rent-free refugee settlement.”^[19]

From the figures published by the Department of Refugees (DoR) under the OPM before the COVID-19 outbreak, it was reported that 14 per cent of the total refugee population in the Greater Arua District lived in then Arua Municipality. It is no exaggeration to deduce that ecological conditions of West Nile's refugee settlements have contributed to refugees' relocation to Arua City for their residence. “Rhino Camp”, one South young male Sudanese refugee underscored in an interview, “can have unbearable temperatures for most part of the year... we just go there to pick up whatever assistance being distributed occasionally and then return here [Arua City].”^[20] While the OPM's DoR emphasises that permission to refugees to reside in urban areas around the country depends on their ability to prove ‘self-sufficiency’, ecological conditions in many designated refugee settlements across the country make them ‘sufficiently unattractive’ for a great many refugees coming from relatively temperate climates across the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa.

Local integration away from direct state and societal scrutiny

The refugees I interacted with in the three cities kept underscoring that not all refugees in their social networks, who left settlements to asylum in urban areas, resided in the big agglomerations next to settlements (Arua, Mbarara cities) or in Kampala. A great many of them, I was told, actually preferred to reside in peri-urban and small urban areas little known for hosting refugees in the first place. A traffic police officer interviewed in Mbarara City revealed the following: “Some refugees left the camp [Nakivale] and now reside in trading centres along the main road. They’re mostly involved in transportation business between the camp and the city. We saw it vividly during the previous COVID-19 lockdown...”^[21]

Those in Arua, Mbarara or Kampala cities, I was further informed, were predominantly beneficiaries of either remittances from relatives and acquaintances outside Uganda or wages and other forms socio-economic assistance from hosts. But many who leave the refugee settlements—for reasons of eking a livelihood beyond the humanitarian assistance provided—often reside in the so-called ‘secondary cities’ (big urban agglomerations in the country’s southwest, mid-west, northwest and north) only as first stop-over. Within a relatively short period of time, they proceed to other distant peri-urban and small urban spaces, namely townships and trading centres along important high-ways, away from curious or suspecting gazes of the host society or the state. As one Burundian male refugee residing in Mbarara City revealed during an interview,

“Many of us left the camps [Oruchinga and Nakivale Refugee Settlements] after a few weeks of being settled there and moved here [Mbarara City]. We did know a few fellow refugees who were already staying in the city. But not all of us who left the camp still reside in Mbarara. A big number moved onto other small urban areas along the Mbarara-Masaka highway. Some went to Kyotera and Lyantonde (about 60 km from Mbarara), and other proceeded further to Lukaya and Kayabwe (about 165 km from Mbarara). You see, no one is staying in those big towns like Masaka or even Kampala. They have preferred those small urban areas where they can integrate within society smoothly without too many questions to be asked and many conditions to be fulfilled... There, they are engaged in some small trade and business; others are working in people’s farms and ranches, and so earning their living without any discrimination or harassment, just like local Ugandans.”^[22]

In an interview with the Kampala Refugee Registration Desk Officer, the latter also revealed without offering statistical data that a great many Kampala-registered refugees actually work and stay in places far away from Kampala Metropolitan Area:

“[...] While a lot of concentration from humanitarian actors has focused on the districts hosting refugee settlements in the southwest, mid-west,

northwest, the north and to some small extent Kampala, refugees leaving the settlements for their self-settlement in urban areas are moving to different places in the country's central, east and even northeast unknown for hosting refugees. You hear about them in towns and trading centres deep in Busoga, Bukedea, in Tororo, Malaba, Busia, and even Moroto. How do I know that they are there? Once in a while, I receive a call from a police officer or an immigration officer all the way from Busia or Tororo, for instance, telling me 'Bwana Afande, I am here with this person saying that he is a refugee duly registered with OPM. But what is he really doing here? Aren't refugees supposed to be in their camps or at least in Kampala?' You see... we must have a comprehensive look at this issue of settlement of refugees in this country. And a lot of sensitisation about our Refugees Act is still needed..."[23]

Whereas the 0.03 hectare of land which is being allocated per refugee household on average in Uganda's refugee settlements – coupled with a host of protection services and livelihood assistance – may still be a welcome offer and even of crucial necessity to their asylum, many refugees (especially those with protracted stays) continually see this settlement-based approach to their protection and livelihood concerns as a constraint rather than an enabler of the much-desired local integration. In some vivid sense, residing in the settlement and being a recipient of protection and humanitarian aid from within the settlement constitute a kind of stigma that inadvertently slows, and in some instances, even challenges possibilities for refugees' local integration into the host society. "Their coming to reside on the edges of the city" one LC I Chairperson in Mbarara City underscored during an interview, "these refugees try to find an escape from much control of their lives in those camps. Nakivale, many tell us, is like a social prison for them..."[24]

Many in such protracted condition of refugeehood, therefore, opt for an exit from refugee settlements into spaces where their local integration – as one of the most pragmatically attainable 'durable solution' in sight – can be fast-tracked. Those spaces, in refugees' informed estimation, are not just found in the so-called secondary cities of Uganda within the refugee-hosting context, namely Mbarara, Fort Portal, Arua and Gulu. They are also, and perhaps most preferably, located in some peri-urban and small urban areas, namely townships and trading centres, along important highways to and from Kampala. There, in those asylum spaces, away from often curious and quizzing gazes of both society and state, these self-settled refugees pursue their versions of local integration with a much greater degree of success.

Some special protection concerns

One last reason the refugees I interacted with provided for their move from refugee settlements to urban spaces consisted of protection-related concerns. Nakivale Refugee Settlement, one male Somali refugee residing in Mbarara City told me, “just wasn’t the place where I wanted my son to grow up in.” Asked why it was so, the male parent retorted:

“I come from a very small minority clan in Somalia. [My clan] is overlooked by other Somalis from big clans. Coming to Uganda via Kenya for refuge was for me and my family one of the surest ways to escape extermination which was going on back home in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Saïd Barre regime. We first stayed in Kenya where the asylum care wasn’t really good for us, and so we decided to come down to Uganda. Once in Uganda, we were transferred to Nakivale. There, once again, we found a relatively big community of Somali refugees in the camp. Each household was allocated a small piece of land and a makeshift shelter on it for survival. The very tensions we fled from in Somalia were now at play in Nakivale. My innocent child, who of course knew nothing about Somali clans and clan relations was always badly mistreated by his fellow children while playing together. The other children from Somali majoritarian clans were told by their parents that my son wasn’t a worthwhile human being, worth being treated with dignity and care. So, he was always discriminated against, kicked around, mocked, etc. Whenever he came to me and asked ‘Daddy, why do they always mistreat me?’ I felt like crying... But I always assured him that we shall soon leave those mistreating people in this miserable Nakivale and move to a better, safer place for you. That’s why my family and I had to leave Nakivale. And although rent and feeding are a bit challenging here [Mbarara City], it is still worth our while living here.”[\[25\]](#)

A Congolese female refugee residing in Kampala also underscored protection-related concern for her child, who was in urgent need of specialised care and/in education, as one of the chief reasons why she left Oruchinga Refugee Settlement. She decided to move first to Mbarara City and then Kampala City:

“My child developed an invisible disability with learning. Bright as she is and also self-asserting, she still needed specialised care in formal education in order to attain her full potential. The health facilities in the camp [Oruchinga] weren’t all well-equipped to attend to the need of my child... I was once told that there is one school in Mbarara City with Special Needs Education that can be of help to my child. So, instead of waiting longer [for OPM relocation to another settlement], I decided to relocate to Mbarara on my own, for the sake of my child. Unfortunately, after a while, that school in Mbarara too couldn’t do much to improve her learning conditions. I was once again told that it is only in Kampala that such specialised care for my child can be got. That’s how I eventually moved to Kampala, and it was the

KCCA Assessment Centre that diagnosed well the condition of my child and then assisted her to learn well with that disability. I actually found many refugee parents there [KCCA Assessment Centre] with children with conditions similar to or even worse than my child's... Life is definitely hard here [Kampala], but it was also very lamentable where I was in the camp. All in all, *afazali* [at least better] here.” [26]

These protection-related concerns were not simply limited to child safety and opportunity for their better growth. They also extend to the physical security of adults and entire households. As one adult male Rwandan refugee residing in Kampala revealed, refugee settlements may be an easy target for kidnap and other malefic treatments for refugees compared to cosmopolitan urban areas:

“As you know, the issue of Rwandan refugees in Uganda has been very controversial, especially since the government of Rwanda evoked the Cessation Clause sometime back in 2010, I think. Having fled from persecution due to my political opinion, I came to Uganda and after a real hustle I was given asylum. I was residing in a camp [Refugee Settlement] in western Uganda due to the fact that I left everything in Rwanda and had almost nothing on me for survival when I crossed the border. Thankfully, a great deal of humanitarian assistance was provided in that camp. But it didn't take so long before I began suspecting strange appearances of people interested in my whereabouts. I quickly figured out that the camp in question wasn't safe for me. That's how I soon relocated to Kampala, where it may be a little harder to track me down compared to when I was in that camp.” [27]

Here, again, the UNHCR assumptions of self-reliance loaded in the current refugee legal and policy frameworks do not hold. It is indeed fallacious to assume that refugees' self-settlement in urban spaces away from the designated refugee settlements should only be permitted on grounds of their 'economic self-sufficiency'. There are various motivations besides self-reliance in terms of livelihoods, which the refugees I interacted with gave out in their accounts of relocation to urban spaces for asylum. Equally, the failure on the part of the Uganda state and funders of its refugee response (mainly the EU) to account for rationales other than 'economic survival migration to the cities' is indeed symptomatic of a broader malaise of bureaucratic processes of refugee protection at many levels. *Prima facie* refugees who are many in numbers, it is here assumed, hold a catalogue of protection concerns different from those granted status through individual status determination processes. Yet, once in places of asylum—in refugee settlements with a concentrated refugee population in relatively small cluster zones—protection concerns that were hitherto articulated in collective terms for *prima facie* refugees often give way to individualised special protection concerns.

Thus, the decision to leave the settlement for asylum elsewhere in fairly cosmopolitan spaces of the country's urban areas is generally individually determined. At the household level, moreover, the execution of such a decision is profoundly gendered: in their capacity of husbands and heads of household, men reportedly do take the final decision to leave the refugee settlement and alone venture out first to explore other spaces of asylum, leaving behind wives and children in a sort of 'asylum limbo.' So prevalent was this pattern of staggered and gendered relocation of refugees from settlements to self-settlement in urban spaces that when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, cities like Arua, Mbarara, and Kampala reckoned with an unprecedented number of self-settling refugees.

Conclusion

The EU funding channeled through UNHCR Uganda has no doubt emboldened Uganda's capacity to manage massive influxes of refugees into the country – such as that of South Sudanese from mid-2016 onwards, recognised and registered on *prima facie* basis – hosted in fairly confined in rural refugee settlements. Concomitantly, little sporadic or no humanitarian care for self-settled refugees and asylum seekers in the country's urban areas, has made Uganda's refugee response a rare testing ground for multiple hypotheses about better asylum policies and refugee-host relations in an increasingly fragile context of urban demographic boom and rural ecological crises. The specific right to freedom of movement within the borders of the country, enshrined in the 2006 Refugees Act, has since opened up Uganda's urban and peri-urban spaces – cities, municipalities, town councils, and trading centres – to refugees' asylum. Undoubtedly, the capital city of Kampala remains Uganda's largest refugee-hosting urban space. Other urban areas too, including recently gazetted cities, municipalities and town councils in the country's northwest, west, north and east, have become sites hosting important numbers of self-settled refugees.

The World Cities Report of 2022 underscores that the future of humanity is undoubtedly urban, but not exclusively in large metropolitan areas.^[28] Uganda's preferred approach to refugee protection – certainly conditioned by its external funding – is indeed worth scrutinising. Both the EU donor-countries and the UNHCR are yet to realise how legislation and regulation on-the-paper should catch up with reality on-the-ground insofar as the country's refugee response is concerned. For many refugees in Uganda today, whether self-settled/ling in urban areas or simply settled/ling in rural-based refugee settlements, voluntary repatriation remains a far-fetched option. It is in the name of local integration that all of the funded refugee self-reliance strategies and practices are done. Yet, the 2006

Refugees Act, akin to the old legal regime, continues to hold recognised refugees in the grip of a 'perpetual alien' status.

Neither the carrots of EU-cum-UNHCR (viz. all the humanitarian care extended to refugees and asylum seekers in a designated refugee settlement) nor the sticks of the Uganda state (viz. the policing of required movement permits for refugees hosted in settlements) seem effective enough to dissuade their move from the rural-based settlements to urban areas in search of the least expensive yet more plausible durable solution to their avail, namely local integration. It is true that there are several protection-enhancing forms of assistance which accrue from residence in Uganda's refugee settlements. But it is also true that many refugees are ready to forego all available protection-enhancing humanitarian assistance rendered to them in the settlements in pursuit of either a distant hope for resettlement or a more palpable hope for local integration, contemplated through seeking direct asylum in the liminal space of urbanity.

What emerges from the externally sourced funding for Uganda's refugee response is a complex mix of hospitality and rigidity in the country's two-pronged approach to refugee protection. Uganda—Africa's topmost refugee-hosting country—is thus hailed for its conspicuously sacrificial hospitality while it also manifests a regimented regime of inaccessible refugee rights. Inadvertently, thanks to EU funding and UNHCR implementation, self-settled refugees residing in the country's urban areas are regarded not as 'effective persons of concern' to the refugee humanitarian regime, but rather often as persons 'to whom it may concern'. Assumed in the eyes of EU donor-countries, the UNHCR and the host state to be self-reliant, these self-settled/ling urban refugees run high risks of exploitation and abuse, not least of all the exposure to multiple forms of human trafficking. Answers to the question of what potential damages of Uganda's current settlement-based model for refugee protection are should not just be framed in socio-economic terms. It is also worth considering what may be psychosocially and no doubt geopolitically at stake in this model for refugee protection.

Footnotes

[1] See <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/press/2021/10/617264574/ugandan-government-and-unhcr-announce-verification-and-profiling-of-asylum.html>.

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[6] See <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4b7baba52.html>.

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[15] KII/M – A/K'LA, 19.07.2022

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[18] FGD/F – A/MBR, 24.06.2022

[19] FGD/Y – M+F/AR'A, 05.07.2022

[20] IDI/Y – M/AR'A, 05.07.2022

[21] KII/M – A/MB'A, 25.06.2022

[22] IDI/M – A/MBR, 27.06.2022

[23] Excerpt from a key informant interview with the Kampala Refugee Registration Desk Officer (KII/M -A/K'LA), 12.08.2022

[24] KII/M – A/MBR, 25.06.2022

[25] IDI/M – A/MBR, 25.06.2022

[26] IDI/F – A/ KL'A, 08.08.2022

[27] IDI/M – A/KL'A, 13.07.2022

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