Spectral self-reliance: an analysis of South Sudanese self-settlement in Northwestern Uganda

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A thesis submitted to the Department of International Development of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD), May 2025.

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Abstract

This thesis responds to two key trends in humanitarian response: one is the ongoing search for durable solutions amid dwindling humanitarian funds, the other is the growing recognition of practices of self-settlement in smaller towns and cities undertaken by displaced populations worldwide. Drawing on the accounts of self-settled South Sudanese refugees, policy documents, observations, and archival research, this thesis contributes multi-scalar empirical material to examine the overlooked ways South Sudanese people navigate the liminal spaces of humanitarian policy in West Nile, Uganda. It attends specifically to the interplay between institutional logics and the everyday survival practices of refugees. The research, which took place at successive intervals between May 2022 and March 2024, relies on the lived accounts and everyday experiences of South Sudanese people living within and beyond formal structures of international refuge, focusing on Arua City and Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement.

The thesis makes three main contributions to debates about mobility, humanitarianism, and displacement. Firstly, it offers rich empirical evidence concerning refugee experiences in a secondary city, spaces which are often overlooked in forced displacement scholarship. In doing so, the thesis provides an in-depth account of the overlooked ways refugees navigate settlement and urban spaces in Uganda, in conversation with the ever-changing landscape of formal humanitarian protection. Contrary to the approach of much policy scholarship, these findings reveal dynamic connections between formally recognised spaces of refuge and self-settlement and draw attention to the complex web of actors that shape South Sudanese experiences in northwestern Uganda, including staff of local and national government, (I)NGOs, international institutions, teachers, landlords, neighbours, and fellow refugees. Taking people's lived realities as a starting point, the thesis can be read as a counter commentary on refuge in Uganda, offering new empirical insights and a reframing of how refuge is produced beyond the well-studied poles of camps and capital cities. In foregrounding this, I argue for a more spatially attentive refugee scholarship that recognises secondary cities and towns as critical sites in the evolving landscape of displacement and protection.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Elizabeth Storer, who has been a constant source of encouragement and constructive critique. She exemplifies what it means to be a mentor. Like many of the talented researchers working in and around Uganda, she displayed enormous generosity in sharing her knowledge and connections since the earliest days of this process.

To my family in the UK and abroad, particularly my mum, dad, aunt Maria, and sisters, who have provided essential support and kept me grounded throughout this lengthy process. Thank you to my daughter Ava, who entered the world at the very start of this PhD. Your confidence, ease, and determination have been a constant source of inspiration. I feel extraordinarily blessed to have shared this journey with you.

I am grateful to friends in Uganda and the UK: Zoë Hayes, Katie Hester, the Dolan family, Jacky Atingo, Julian Hopwood, Joseph Okello, Chiara Chiavaroli, Costanza Torre, Ciara Silke, Ingrid Erriu, Jaskirat Mann, Hannah Scott, the Serwats, Toni Oki, Dominik Diak, Monica Rådström, James McMullan, Julian Graham, Sapandeep Singh Maini-Thompson, and Sabeera Dar. All have provided steadfast support both personally and professionally. I am especially thankful for those who have hosted Ava and me over the years – in Gulu, Arua, and Tika – we miss you all dearly.

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'The postmodern, late-capitalist, postcolonial world represses and projects its ghosts or phantoms in similar intensities, if not entirely in the same forms, as the older world did.'

Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 2008, p. 13.

Figures

Acronyms

CPA – Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRRF – Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
DRC – the Democratic Republic of Congo
FDP – Food Distribution Point
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
GFA – General Food and cash Assistance
GUREC – Gulu University Research Ethics Committee
ILO – International Labour Organisation
(I)NGO – (International) Non-Governmental Organisation
IPC – Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IPE – Individual Profiling Exercise
IRC – International Rescue Committee
LC – Local Councillor
NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council
OPM – Office of the Prime Minister
POCs – Persons of Concern
PRS – Protracted refugee situations
PSNs – Persons with Specific Needs
RCS – Rhino Camp Settlement
RDO – Regional Desk Officer
RLP – Refugee Law Project
RWC – Refugee Welfare Committee
SPLM/A – Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM-IO - Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
SRS – Self-Reliance Strategy
SSURA – South Sudanese Refugees' Association
STA – Settlement Transformative Agenda
UBOS – Ugandan Bureau of Statistics
UGX – Ugandan Shillings
UN – United Nations
UNCST – Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund
USD – United States Dollars
WFP – World Food Programme
YSAT – Youth Social Advocacy Team

Maps

For a broad regional overview, I use two UNHCR maps. Figure 1 shows the northwestern region, including key border crossing points. This map was selected in the interest of clarity; however, the settlement landscape has changed since this map was produced. Bidibidi and Imvepi opened in August 2016 and February 2017. Figure 2 shows both Arua City and all current refugee settlements across West Nile. Figure 3 provides a more detailed view of Arua City. Obtaining a clear, up-to-date map of Arua City is challenging, as available cartographic materials often reflect projected urban planning futures rather than lived realities. The OpenStreetMap identifies neighbourhoods and locations referenced throughout this thesis and aligns with residents' terminology, making it a practical reference. I also include the 2018 UNHCR *Masterplan of Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement* (Figure 4), which highlights key points for orientation and contextual understanding.

Figure 1 - Map of UGANDA: Northwestern region. UNHCR offices and refugee locations. Source: UNHCR, 2014.

Figure 2 - Updated settlement map. Source: UNHCR, 2018a.
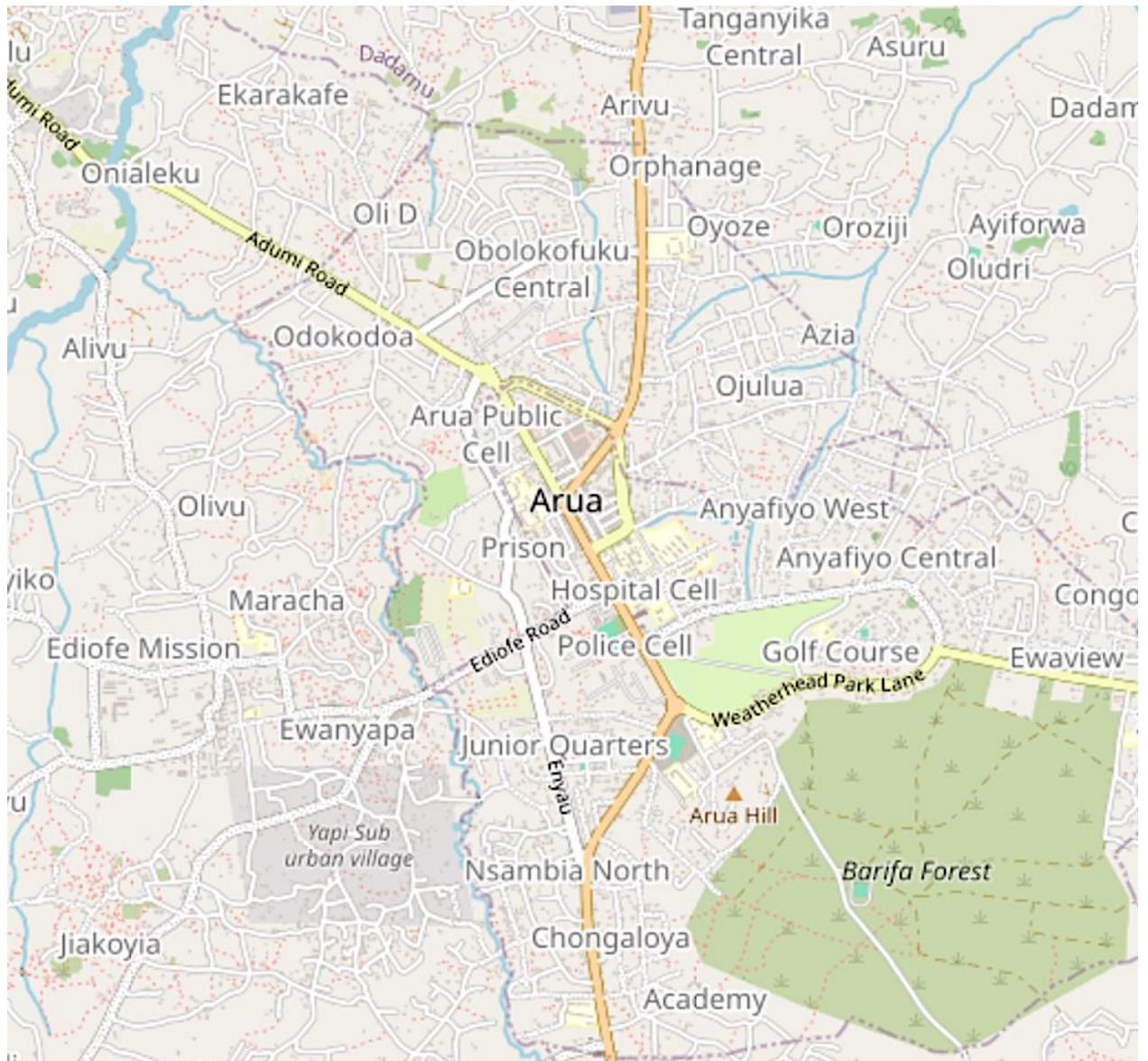
Figure 3 - Map of Arua City (OpenStreetMap 2025).

Figure 4 - Masterplan of Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement. Source: UNHCR, 2018b.

Chapter 1: Introduction

We begin with the story of Yom, a South Sudanese woman I met in Arua City, Uganda, in 2022. I open with Yom's story because it is illustrative of the multiple displacements, uncertainty and precarity that characterise displacement for many of those who were interviewed in the course of this thesis. Like thousands of others, Yom's movements from South Sudan to one of Uganda's refugee settlements to Arua City test the ambiguous edges of Uganda's world-famous refugee policy framework. Moving with Yom's story across divergent spaces over time, this opening points to a wider framing of refuge which looks beyond spatialised accounts of humanitarian governance. Her story is not exceptional. Rather, her story, like many others, reflects the complexities of lifetimes of conflict and spatially differentiated drivers of displacement. By charting outwards from Yom's story, this opening sets the stage for the thesis, which aims to account for the uneven temporal, spatial, and interpersonal factors that interact as people carve out spaces for survival alongside formal humanitarian interventions in northwestern Uganda.

Navigating precarious refuge

Yom is a woman in her late thirties from a village in Cuibet County, Lakes State, in the central region of South Sudan. In rural Cuibet, she depended on farming and cattle rearing to support her young children. Life in Lakes State, much like elsewhere in South Sudan, had become increasingly complex since 2013. Armed cattle raiding, inter-communal violence, attacks on civilians by armed men, and sporadic outbreaks of violence between government security forces and local youth displaced entire villages and disrupted vital food sources. Two and a half years after South Sudan gained independence,[1] on December 15, 2013, fighting broke out between government forces loyal to the new President, Salva Kiir, who leads the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and those loyal to his former Deputy, Riek Machar, then leader of

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[1] There are no easy narrations of the civil war in South Sudan. Though it is not possible to do the complex roots and tensions that animate the conflict landscape in South Sudan justice here, it is important to note that the civil war has deep historical roots linked to the legacies of colonial violence, unresolved power struggles, and pervasive economic fragility (Kindersley and Rolandsen, 2017; Bimeny, 2022). Many South Sudanese people have sought refuge numerous times throughout their lives, sheltering in bushlands, internal displacement camps, the homes of relatives and neighbours, churches, mosques, schools, and across international borders.

the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO). This marked the start of the South Sudanese civil war, which has led to widespread atrocities and displacements.

The spread of conflict and the failures of internationally-supported peace agreements since 2015, combined with a complex interplay of factors including climate hazards, environmental destruction, armed movements, inter-communal conflicts, and immense food insecurity, have driven millions into internal displacement and millions more across international borders to neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (UNHCR, 2023g, pp. 6-7). The pace of international displacement increased significantly from July 2016, when explosions and heavy gunfire across Juba signalled the collapse of the fragile peace agreement. The resulting exodus from South Sudan quickly became the fastest-growing refugee crisis globally (Vigaud-Walsh, 2017).

Despite the 2018 peace agreement, many forms of violence persisted as South Sudan remained in a state that Hutchinson and Pendle described as 'a state of suspension between peace and war' (2015, p. 416). Unable to endure the instability at home any longer, in 2018, Yom travelled with her four children to Uganda - a country that has long established its global reputation as 'one of the best places to be a refugee' (BBC, 2016). By the time Yom and her family registered in 2018, Uganda hosted over one million refugees, most of whom were from South Sudan. At the time, an estimated 85% of the South Sudanese population in Uganda were women and children (United Nations Security Council, 2018, p. 7).

After a long and challenging journey, the family arrived at the South Sudan-Uganda border crossing in Nimule (see Figure 1). Crossing to Elegu, they were officially documented and placed on a waiting list for transfer to Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement Reception Centre. Several days later, when they reached the top of the list, a UNHCR-funded private coach transported them to the Reception Centre in Ocea,[2] where they registered as refugees under the joint oversight of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At this point, Yom and her family were incorporated into the mainstay of Uganda's humanitarian infrastructure – a settlement system that allocates a plot of land to each registered

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[2] Indicated as Ocea RC in Figure 1.

household within a relatively open setting, where refugee plots are situated alongside neighbouring Ugandan homesteads. At the time, Rhino Camp Settlement (RCS) was rapidly expanding and hosted well over 100,000 formally registered refugees from across South Sudan (UNHCR and REACH, 2018, p. 1).[3] After Yom and her children had spent over a week in the reception centre, OPM-UNHCR completed their registration as a refugee household before taking them 14 km from the reception centre to their plot in Block 1D, Tika Zone.

According to its advocates, Uganda's refugee hosting framework aspires to create an enabling environment for the realisation of self-reliance – a central policy aspiration for humanitarian actors operating in protracted displacement situations globally, whereby refugee populations are enabled to achieve a level of economic independence from humanitarian aid. As reflected by numerous critiques of the realities of refugee hosting in Uganda (Easton-Calabria, 2015; Betts *et al.,* 2021; Omata, 2020; O'Byrne, 2022), life in the settlement was not easy. Yom and her family slept under trees near the burned land until they were able to build a shelter. Though they had been given basic construction materials by staff at the reception centre – including poles, rope, UNHCR-branded mats, and tarpaulins – Yom had to sell several of the allocated utensils to source the remaining items – including nails to secure the structure. Eventually, with the help of their new neighbours, they built a home and began to cultivate their plot. Nonetheless, the size and quality of the plots allocated to refugees rendered the plots insufficient to feed even a relatively small family like Yom's. Though WFP supplied monthly food assistance to mitigate hunger, the rations were inadequate. Limited access to land and goods undermined prospects for self-reliance and social well-being. Tension rippled among neighbouring Ugandan citizens and South Sudanese settlers: everyday life became marked by verbal and sometimes physical altercations over access to vital resources, including water and firewood.

Faced with the daily challenges of life in RCS and the aftermath of several incidents of violence, including the September 2020 attack that left 10 South Sudanese dead (detailed in Chapter 4),

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[3] Rhino Camp Settlement (RCS) was formally established in 1980 as an interim transit camp. Since then, the population of RCS has fluctuated in accordance with changing scales of international displacement. Since the outbreak of the South Sudanese civil war, RCS has been expanded several times to cope with new influxes. As of June 2022, RCS was home to 136,901 refugees (UNHCR, 2022). Over 72% of refugees in Arua City are affiliated with RCS (VNG International, 2024, p. 55). I return to the specific history of Rhino Camp Settlement in Chapter 4.

Yom decided to leave the camp for Arua City, the regional centre of West Nile, approximately 1.5 hours by public taxi from her home in Tika.[4] Drawing on their monthly ration of 31,000 Ugandan Shillings (UGX) per person, Yom travelled with her children to Nsambya Cell, located on the southern side of the city, where some of her former neighbours from Tika were renting with their children. There, she rented a single-room grass-thatched house from a Ugandan landlord for 20,000 UGX a month (roughly 5.50 United States Dollar (USD) at the time).

In 2022, when I first met Yom, she sat on the tree roots that sprawled across the uneven land in front of her rented home, just two kilometres from the centre of Arua City.[5] Speaking softly, she recounted how life in the town had become increasingly difficult, the strain of this situation etched on her face (O-3).[6] With no other sources of income and six children in her care (two of whom she had given birth to in Uganda), she relied financially on the monthly rations she collected from the settlement. Within the strict spatial boundaries of the formal humanitarian infrastructure, which are determined in policy spaces beyond West Nile, Yom and her family relinquished their rights to ongoing humanitarian assistance by moving to Arua.[7] Despite a lack of official recognition, the presence of South Sudanese populations is tacitly accepted.[8] As the Arua city health inspector put it, 'on a daily basis, we interact with refugees… in the homes and schools you get them there' (I-117). Registered and receiving material support via the settlement while residing outside its geographical limits, households like Yom's defy the boundaries of bureaucratic and administrative categorisation. Ultimately, though moving would mean reduced

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[4] A public taxi is a car that makes in-demand journeys (e.g. between Arua City and Koboko, between Arua City and Ocea). They offer a relatively affordable way to make journeys out of the city. They do not operate on a fixed schedule, and they generally do not depart if the seats are not fully occupied.

[5] The city is a cosmopolitan area of diverse nationalities and linguistic groupings. Formally declared a city in 2020, the recent reclassification of the town to a city is a long-overdue reflection of its outsized regional position and impact. Situated approximately 20 km from the Uganda-DRC border and 70 km from the South Sudan-Uganda border, it is an important space for cross-border migration and trade between northern Uganda, South Sudan, and the DRC. Being a border city with relatively stable infrastructure, Arua attracts a high daytime population and has a sizeable population of residents who consider themselves 'refugees'.

[6] I- denotes an interview, and the number indicates which interview it relates to. A full list of interviews, cases (O-), and focus group discussions (F-) can be found in Appendix A.

[7] Constrained by Uganda's legislation, (international) non-governmental organisations, unable to acknowledge the presence of urban refugees beyond Kampala, were also unable to offer help in Arua.

[8] The Regional Desk Officer for West Nile, who is the regional representative for the Office of the Prime Minister, repeatedly called upon South Sudanese community leaders who were registered as refugees and still residing in town.

proximity to settlement services - and regular and expensive journeys back to the settlement to obtain rations - she considered this a necessary decision for her family's security.

For Yom, whose only source of income was the monthly rations provided by the settlement, maintaining access to these resources was essential. Yom remarked, 'At that time [referring to when she first moved to the city], life was better because the food was there, but now the available food is reducing, making renting hard' (I-133). By 2022, her rent, which was 20,0000 UGX per month in 2020, had increased to 50,000 UGX per month (approximately 13 USD).[9] This rapid inflation reflected increased demand for residential rentals in the city. These increases and inflationary pressures on food and transport costs (Ainomugisha, 2022) also coincided with reductions in settlement support. From November 2021, WFP reduced ration allocations to 22,000 UGX monthly for each household member.[10] In 2022, after accounting for the return journey to collect the household ration from the food distribution point, Yom remained with just 114,000 UGX (approximately 31 USD) – a figure vastly insufficient to cover even basic household needs, including food, water, and rent.

As a result, Yom found herself in increasingly fractious tension with her landlord. She owed him six months of accumulated rental payments.[11] Her landlord, who lived in Yumbe, two hours northeast of Arua City, came regularly to demand his money. Even though Yom was prepared to return to the settlement, he threatened that he would not allow her to leave until she cleared her debts. My colleague, John, who had been translating and had known Yom when she lived in the settlement, noted that she had lost a lot of weight since he had last seen her – 'she used not to be like this'. To those who had known Yom when she lived in the settlement, the growing frailty of her physical appearance evidenced the effects of compounding stress. Her body reflected the complex accumulated strain of being uprooted from social connections and places, and of facing constant physical and material insecurity.

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[9] Based on an exchange rate USD 1 = approximately UGX 3,780. As on 7 January 2024.
[10] In in-kind food, this amounted to 8.82 kgs cereals, 2.1 kgs pulses and 0.63 litres vegetable oil per household member (WFP and REACH, 2021).
[11] Neighbouring Yom were three other South Sudanese families living in identical housing, who were all facing arrears of five months or more. The same landlord owned each of the four houses.

According to Uganda's formal policy stipulations, contrary to international refugee law, refugees, like Yom, who exercise their right to freedom of movement and relocate beyond settlements or Kampala, are not genuine refugees; they indirectly declare themselves financially independent of humanitarian aid. As anthropologist Tania Kaiser noted nearly twenty years ago, 'the implementation of the settlement policy in Uganda has effectively redefined the category "refugee" so that it has come to refer only to a person who is in receipt of assistance and living in a physical space defined by the government of Uganda' (2006, p. 605). During the early days of my research, government officials, (I)NGOs and UN staff reminded me repeatedly that 'there are no urban refugees outside of Kampala' (I-129, 130, and 161).[12] In line with Uganda's formal refugee regulations, these officials implied that those who choose to settle outside the refugee settlements elsewhere in Uganda, who transgress the redefined boundaries of the refugee category, are considered to be financially independent, or 'self-reliant'. This framing aligns closely with policy narratives that position refugees as potential contributors to local markets and national development, but it also risks narrowing the meaning of self-reliance to economic productivity, obscuring the structural and political conditions that shape refugees' lives. As Yom's experience indicates, notions of these self-settled populations as self-reliant obscure the lived realities of people who make decisions for survival amidst highly contingent circumstances.

Conceptually and in policy terms, these families deny neat administrative categorisation. They are neither unregistered nor residing in the settlement. Despite this ambiguous legal status, this is a widespread practice. Approximately 25,000 and 24,000 self-declared refugees live in Koboko Municipality and Arua City, respectively (VNG International, 2024, p. 42).[13, 14] Of these, 72% in Koboko and 63.5% in Arua have formally registered as refugees under the settlement

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[12] This echoes the position of various government staff based in Koboko, a municipality one hour north of Arua, twenty years ago, who claimed, 'there are no refugees in this area' (quotation from Refugee Law Project, 2005, p. 19).

[13] Though not all South Sudanese are refugees in the legal sense, they are commonly referred to and referred to themselves as 'refugees' (discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). Of the 24,000 refugees identified in the 2023 data collection, over 80% of these are South Sudanese (VNG International, 2024, p. 42).

[14] Throughout this thesis when referring to Arua, unless otherwise stated, I mean Arua City. When referring specifically to Arua District or the former municipality, I will clarify. It is also worth noting that Arua District formerly covered almost the whole West Nile sub-region. As with the rest of Uganda, the redrawing of internal boundaries has been a key feature of politics since independence, and particularly under the NRM government (Green, 2018).

infrastructure (VNG International, 2024, p. 54). It would be an analytical oversight to characterise these populations as merely overlooked or excluded by policy. Rather, they occupy a liminal position in which their lives are deeply entangled with the logics, practices, and consequences of policy, even as they remain formally unacknowledged within it. Stories which trace complex migratory pathways across diverse spaces sharply contrast the siloed, spatialised readings of refuge found in bureaucratic designations of personhood and space in Uganda, emphasising the point that people rarely fit the neatly circumscribed bureaucratic imaginaries bound up in the categories applied to them. Instead, their everyday experiences—of housing, livelihood, health, security, and mobility—are mediated through a constellation of actors, including local government and settlement authorities, informal intermediaries, NGOs, and market traders. By centring these experiences, this research seeks to interrogate how refugees navigate and make sense of governance systems that are fragmented, uneven, and only partially legible as 'refugee policy' in a conventional sense.

Tracing refugee experiences beyond the formal settlement infrastructure through 13 months of in-person data collection, interviews, observations, policy documents, and archival research, this thesis charts upwards from the complexity of heterogenous lived experiences of women, young people, and their families to map the overlooked spaces, people, and lines of dependency that characterise refuge for those who reside beyond settlements and beyond the capital. In doing so, it asks how proponents of refugee policy, government bureaucrats, and aid practitioners render particular (im)mobilities visible and others not and with what consequences.

Situating refuge in Uganda in global context

Before turning to the lived experiences and critical perspectives that animate this study, it is first necessary to situate Uganda within the broader architecture of the global refugee regime. Understanding the historical and policy foundations of Uganda's approach is essential to appreciating both the scope of its international influence and the tensions that underlie its celebrated model of refugee governance.

As of October 2024, Uganda hosted 1.7 million people in a country of approximately 50 million citizens. This is the largest African refugee population, and, on a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita basis, this is the largest refugee population in the world. Uganda's refugee population

comprises approximately 900,000 South Sudanese, 500,000 Congolese[15] and smaller populations from several countries, including Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, and Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2024b). Reflecting this national story, northwestern Uganda, the focus of this study, is an area with one of the world's highest refugee-to-host population ratios (Komakech *et al.,* 2019).

Through the Refugee Act 2006 and the Refugee Regulations 2010, Uganda's open-door policy provides refugees with key rights, including the right to freedom of movement, to work and to access some public services on an equal basis with Ugandan citizens. Within this system, South Sudanese citizens can claim prima facie refugee status in Uganda and its associated entitlements. This approach has been further consolidated through Uganda's leadership role in global refugee initiatives. For example, in 2017, Uganda became the first refugee-hosting country to implement the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which all United Nations (UN) member states adopted in September 2016 as part of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, affirming the government of Uganda's leadership in this space. This has been realised through government-led coordination structures in Uganda intended to provide a whole-of-society mechanism for refugee and host-community inclusion.[16]

Uganda's approach to refugees stands in stark contrast to the nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments fuelling restrictive border policies worldwide. Countries worldwide have increasingly relied on controversial offshore processing facilities, such as those in Colombia, Guatemala, and Nauru (Morris, 2023; Crisp, 2021), as well as externalising their borders across North Africa (Andersson, 2014). Across Europe, EU member states refuse to assist vessels in distress, resulting in harrowing accounts of migrant death on overcrowded, unseaworthy boats (McGowan, 2023). In the UK, where I will submit this thesis, the government has adopted a 'hostile environment' strategy that creates a climate of fear and vulnerability among migrants and asylum seekers by severely limiting access to housing, employment, and public services while also

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[15] From DRC.

[16] In Uganda, the CRRF brings the government of Uganda and the UN together with the World Bank, donors, development partners, the private sector, national and international INGOs, and civil society in a multi-stakeholder coordination model. The goals of the CRRF are to bring a holistic approach to refugee-hosting by encouraging broader stakeholder engagement. Drawing humanitarian and developmental goals under one framework provides a basis for policymakers to integrate refugees into Uganda's national planning frameworks, such as the Health and the Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2021–2025.

conducting violent deportations. Aggressive political narratives demonise migrants to justify divisive measures, such as the British Rwanda Plan and proposals from the Netherlands to send failed asylum seekers to Uganda. The British government recently announced that anyone who enters the UK illegally will have their citizenship application refused, in contradiction of international law designed to provide specific guarantees to refugees (Easton, 2025). These policies undermine the rights and well-being of migrants, making them more susceptible to exploitation and marginalisation.

Faced with hostility to asylum seekers and faltering commitments to even the most basic notions of shared humanity, Uganda's approach is a welcome relief. As a result, this relatively liberal policy framework has held a prime spot as the pinnacle of state-sanctioned generosity towards the internationally displaced. In 2017, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres remarked, 'In a world where so many people are selfishly closing their doors, closing their borders, not allowing refugees to come, [Uganda] deserves praise [and] admiration from the whole international community' (United Nations, 2017). However, as Kaiser noted from her examination of the challenges faced by Sudanese refugees in Ugandan settlements in the 2000s, 'The fact that the rights of some others are abused more than theirs does not mean that their own rights are not also being undermined' (2006, p. 605).

Research aims, objectives, and contributions

With due recognition for this context, this thesis extends these debates through a critical examination of the intersections between policy, discourse, and everyday practice with regard to self-settled refugee populations in Uganda. Drawing on anthropological approaches to policy and humanitarian governance, it offers a distinctive intervention in the study of refugee self-reliance by reversing the conventional policy lens: rather than beginning with formal policy texts and tracing their implementation, it starts with the material, spatial, and affective experiences of self-settled refugees in Arua, Uganda. From these everyday experiences, the research traces how a complex ecology of policies, infrastructural absences, institutional expectations, and social relations forms around and through refugee lives. This bottom-up approach produces a critical cartography of refuge that is ethnographically grounded, enabling a thicker, more plural encounter with the global humanitarian governance regime. It attends specifically to the interplay

between institutional logics, not always formally articulated but powerfully felt, structuring refugee life in subtle and pervasive ways, and the everyday survival practices of refugees.

The thesis makes three main contributions:

1. It offers an in-depth examination of the spatial and material experience of refuge with a particular focus on a secondary city—an analytical vantage point that remains largely underexplored in refugee studies. By centring Arua City rather than capitals or formal settlements, the research highlights the unique spatial, social, and infrastructural dynamics of refugee life in a secondary urban context, revealing patterns of movement, place-making, and everyday survival that are often overlooked in more conventional analyses.

2. Second, the analysis of refugee governance and policy implementation through the lives of people navigating life as refugees in Uganda challenges conventional approaches that confine refugee studies to institutionally defined spaces. Rather than focusing solely on official settlements or clearly demarcated urban zones, I trace the dynamic geographies created through movement, place-making, and social practice. This shift allows for a more nuanced understanding of how refuge is experienced and enacted beyond formal recognition or denial. Through close attention to the ways South Sudanese individuals navigate, resist, and engage with bureaucratic systems, the thesis constructs a grounded counter-narrative of refuge in Uganda, emphasising that the practices holding refuge together are often improvisational and collective, informed, but not dictated by state or humanitarian intervention. This evidence expands the lens for understanding how policies operate beyond humanitarian frameworks, showing how refugee infrastructure functions across non-linear temporalities and extended geographies. It highlights how humanitarian policies shape, and are shaped by, spaces and practices not formally recognised as 'refugee spaces,' demonstrating the permeability of the boundaries between humanitarian and non-humanitarian domains and reiterating the need for ethnographic, extended, embodied evidence of the lived realities of displacement in diverse settings.

3. The thesis conceptualises self-reliance not as a discrete policy artefact but a spectral, infrastructural logic: an enduring expectation of what refugees should be, even when no aid structure actively supports it. It contributes to debates on the governance of

displacement and links them to a hauntological analytic, showing how affective control, silences, and instances of structural and direct violence coalesce against South Sudanese populations. This logic haunts urban space, appearing through gaps, absences, refusals, or the withdrawal of services, and shapes both the everyday practices and subjectivities of refugees. In doing so, the thesis reveals how global humanitarian logics are materially, socially, and affectively embedded in local contexts, persisting long after formal programmes have receded.

The following sections first review literature on self-reliance, tracing the concept's evolution and its discursive and operational articulation within Uganda's humanitarian governance. I then examine how academic and policy literature address self-settled refugee populations, with attention to the Ugandan context and its implications for inclusion and recognition, as well as insights from work on urban refuge and mobility. Next, I draw on anthropological studies of policy to outline an analytical lens for understanding the diffuse, multi-scalar, and often informal nature of refugee governance in Uganda. Finally, I situate this thesis within the broader scholarly engagement with Uganda's refugee-hosting framework.

Interrogating self-reliance: policy, practice, and critique

At the heart of policy documents, programmatic interventions, and the celebrated international reputation of Uganda's refugee response lies the concept of 'self-reliance'. Formally defined in UNHCR documentation as the ability of refugees to 'meet [their] essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity' (2005, p. 1). This is a policy construct with multiple guises (Wuerth *et al.*, 2024): ambiguous in meaning, elastic in interpretation, and deeply embedded in the rhetoric of humanitarian governance (Easton-Calabria, 2020). Rather than treating self-reliance as a stable or singular policy, I explore how it functions in practice: as a discursive tool invoked by NGOs and state actors, as an expectation placed on refugees, and as a contradictory presence in lives shaped by structural exclusion, precarious access to services, and constrained economic opportunities. In this sense, self-reliance is not the object of analysis, but one of many entangled forces that shape refugee experience.

While self-reliance is often referenced as a policy goal in Uganda's refugee response, it is not a standalone policy in itself. Rather, it operates as a guiding discourse — a flexible and often contradictory organising principle that informs a wide range of state, donor, and humanitarian interventions. The analysis presented in this section emerges from a critical engagement with existing literature critiquing the creep of neoliberal constructs into humanitarian policy, policy documentation, and the empirical material generated through this research. Self-reliance is not a uniquely Ugandan invention; it has a long and complex global history as a central framing concept in international responses to displacement. Yet its contemporary articulation within Uganda's refugee framework offers a particularly illuminating case through which to examine how global policy ideals are translated into localised humanitarian governance practices. The first sub-section traces the global history of self-reliance as a policy paradigm, before turning to its operationalisation and contestation within Uganda's humanitarian and development landscape.

Self-reliance and the international refugee architecture

To situate the logic of self-reliance, it is necessary to trace its historical and conceptual emergence within humanitarian policy frameworks. In her extensive, multi-country study of refugee self-reliance assistance, Evan Easton-Calabria (2015, 2022) shows that while formalised notions of refugee self-reliance have prevailed since the 1980s, the concept has circulated as a dynamic and adaptable notion in international institutions since the 1920s. The recursive prevalence of global self-reliance agendas closely correlates with the limits of durable solutions. The three durable solutions to refugee displacement recognised by the United Nations since the 1970s are voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement (Bradley *et al.,* 2022). However, whenever any version of these solutions exists, they are often diluted, with one or more core rights compromised. For example, imposed or safe returns replace voluntary repatriation (Chimni, 2004). Meanwhile, local integration tends to fall short of citizenship, resulting in a compromised approach that facilitates prolonged but nonetheless temporary hosting (Hovil and Maple, 2022).[17] While durable solutions represent long-term state-oriented

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[17] Durable solutions are not necessarily a guarantee of rights, as demonstrated by the immense precarity experienced by internally displaced persons around the world and by the complexities observed even after refugees have formally returned 'home' (Bakewell, 2008a, p. 1357; Omata, 2013, p. 1281). It is, therefore, essential to remember that while effective citizenship remains a particularly potent form of political inclusion, it is not a panacea (Maple and Hovil,

resolutions that enable refugees to rebuild their lives, they have limited viability. It is within this context of constrained alternatives and restricted humanitarian budgets that self-reliance assumes prominence as a mobilising aspiration, positioning refugees—through policy frameworks—as active agents responsible for securing their own financial stability.

In the contemporary setting, UNHCR defines self-reliance as 'the social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a community to meet essential needs in a sustainable manner' (2005, p. 2). Self-reliance contrasts with 'dependency' on humanitarian aid, which undermines 'the capacities of individuals to cope with crisis' (*ibid.*). It is a multiscalar term which corresponds both to individual capacities to cope with crisis and a more relational definition which accounts for household or communal dynamics. The concept of self-reliance is inherently multiscalar, encompassing both individual and collective dimensions. While the guidebook definition recognises the community and household as units of import, gesturing towards the relevance of social relations in meeting essential needs, emphasis, in terms of programmatic interventions, is placed on the individual. At the individual level, self-reliance emphasises personal capacities: the skills, knowledge, and agency of a person to meet their essential needs, generate income, and cope with crises independently of external aid. This same link is made in UNHCR guidance, whereby the role of humanitarian actors is to '[develop and strengthen] livelihoods of persons of concern', thereby 'reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance' (UNHCR, 2005, p. 2). The key point is that self-reliance is fundamentally about reducing dependence on humanitarian funding and external aid, particularly in contexts of constrained budgets. This framing aligns with neoliberal humanitarian logics that valorise personal responsibility, productivity, and measurable outcomes, such as employment or income generation (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018; Krause and Schmidt, 2019).

In practice, this reflects a dual concern with durable solutions for refugees and the pragmatics of international funding, emphasising the shift from purely humanitarian resources toward developmental financing streams. A sympathetic interpretation of the promotion of self-reliance by international institutions emphasises that the prominence of self-reliance emerges from

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2025). Further, Landau (2018) indicates the limits of formal documentation to guarantee service access. The end of 'displacement' is insufficient to enable full access to rights, safety, and dignity.

regretful compromise. In 1986, Jean-Pierre Hocké, then the High Commissioner of UNHCR, stated, 'If the option of return or voluntary repatriation cannot be contemplated in the short or medium term, solutions must be devised to enable the refugees to achieve some measure of self-reliance since this is the best way of maintaining their dignity' (Hocké, 1986). Without large-scale solutions, donors and international humanitarian agencies frame self-reliance as a viable way to enable populations to self-manage when confronted with limited financial resources. As seen in the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, contemporary global interventions reflect the same sentiment - rather than emphasising durable solutions, they seek to identify 'local solutions' and 'complementary pathways'. Correspondingly, this logic underpins the global policy agenda: at the heart of the CRRF emerging from the New York Declaration, are four goals, one of which explicitly seeks to 'enhance refugee self-reliance' (UN, 2016, Annex I, para. 18). By linking self-reliance to livelihoods and economic participation, the CRRF and associated initiatives aim to integrate refugees into national development frameworks, while reducing long-term aid dependency through market- and development-oriented interventions.

Though accurate, this interpretation neglects the uneven political and financial interests that drive the scale of humanitarian support in particular contexts. Intensely political and racialised considerations of who is worth saving have consistently informed humanitarian imaginaries, action, and conduct (Fassin, 2007, p. 500). While the humanitarian system espouses a universal ethics of 'humanity', in practice it operates a 'hierarchy of humanity' (Fassin, 2010), whereby donors favour politically strategic crises (Drury *et al.,* 2005; Narang, 2016). Accordingly, when the scale of displacement erodes the financial and political backing for particular humanitarian responses, self-reliance, loosely defined as 'the ability to live independently from institutional aid' (Easton-Calabria, 2019, p. 144), functions as a 'self-serving strategy' that focuses on the 'reduction of material assistance in line with falling UNHCR budgets' (Hunter, 2009, p. 2). States, donors, and international institutions have persistently used the narrative of refugee economic empowerment to justify 'decreased assistance to protracted refugee populations, and even completely withdrawing assistance' (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018, p. 1466), ultimately maintaining the fault lines of globalised inequality.

The highly politicised and racialised calculations which inform who is 'deserving' of assistance also vary over time. For those displaced across borders and granted international recognition as refugees, support tends to focus narrowly on the moment of cross-border mobility. Initially, there may be some societal acceptance of dependency in the immediate aftermath of international displacement, but this attention tends to fade over time. Protracted refugee situations (PRS), defined as exile for over five years without any immediate prospects for durable solutions, such as voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement (Crisp, 2003, p. 1; Zetter and Long, 2012; Milner, 2014), face reduced support despite minimal changes in their access to resources in displacement. Most people designated as refugees in protracted situations of displacement are designated on a prima facie basis, most of whom are in Global South countries, limiting their entitlement to the full rights articulated in the 1951 Refugee Convention. As Hyndman and Giles observe, this status guarantees 'little more than protection from refoulement (forced return) and enough food, water, shelter, and medicine to survive' (2018, p. 77). Ultimately, the label PRS, in an act of epistemic violence, flattens 'a multitude of geography, history, and context' (*ibid.*, p. 74). Building on her work in northwestern and western Uganda, Kaiser observed (2006, p. 601), in the absence of additional resources, jobs, and opportunities, 'refugee livelihoods face more rather than fewer challenges as their exile becomes protracted' – a fact which donors and governments tend to ignore.

Refugee studies scholars, Carpi *et al.* (2020) trace the modern understanding of self-reliance to nineteenth-century American philosophical ideals that emphasised individual self-sufficiency over welfare state support. They argue that the tendency towards the individual embedded in self-reliance agendas corresponds with broader shifts in the humanitarian sector, which position refugees as potential workers who can contribute to their host country's economy (*ibid.*, p. 424). Instead of promoting genuine social and economic welfare, neoliberal ideologies emphasise marketised consumption, access to loans and entrepreneurial opportunities over social security. Consequently, refugees' needs for basic services and security are subordinate to the logic of individual entrepreneurship within a market-driven environment (Crisp, 2009; Jacobsen, 2005; Fiori *et al.*, 2017). As such, the lexicon of self-reliance reflects a politically and financially strategic calculation which produces refugees as 'agents of development' (Meyer, 2006) who are ultimately responsible for their experiences of displacement (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015).

Much like its maligned counterpart – resilience, which is broadly presented as the ability of individuals and communities to withstand shocks in the absence of structural change – self-reliance is a scalable term that evokes the prospect of reform through disaster (Duffield, 2012, 2015; Omata, 2023; Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015; Scott-Smith, 2018; Hilhorst, 2018; Munive, 2021). Resilience and self-reliance, as guiding principles for humanitarian action, become '[methodologies] of power which rely on quiet adaptation to conditions of uncertainty rather than system change' (Welsh, 2014, p. 21). These critiques correspond with the critical literature on neoliberal developmental and humanitarian buzzwords, including resilience, bootstrap development, localisation, and empowerment, which, while emerging from legitimate critiques of social welfare, developmental and humanitarian aid, are coopted as an excuse for disengagement by key power holders (Oliver and Boyle, 2020; Beck, 2017; Ilcan and Lacey, 2011).

This portrayal reframes refugees as entrepreneurial subjects and obscures the systemic conditions of their suffering, creating the illusion of choice and autonomy in their lives within camps and shifting the responsibility for welfare from state structures to individuals. Neglecting the need for structural change, individualising discourses locate the source of any resulting problems or failures in populations themselves. While self-reliance is valorised as a desirable outcome, dependency – the condition of not being able to 'meet immediate basic needs in the absence of relief assistance' (Harvey and Lind, 2005, p. 3) – is a dehumanising, paternalistic, classed and racialised discourse which situates beneficiaries as becoming overly reliant on charitable handouts. This discourse dismisses 'dependent' refugees as idle and unwilling to adapt to the options presented to them, profiting from the generosity of others.

At the same time, the discursive strategies of the international humanitarian order 'constitute phenomena as problems whose solution requires international interventions' (Merlingen, 2003, pp. 367-368; Turner, 2016; Mosse, 2011). For example, programmatic interventions focus on fixing 'refugee mindsets' (Allen and Turton, 1996; Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018), meanwhile, the factors that inhibit 'independence' – such as the location and quality of allocated land for refugees and legal impediments to employment - are invisibilised. This pathology frames 'crises' as driven by internal causes at the location of insecurity. As such, the humanitarian system directs its prescription towards the internal dysfunctions of disaster regions with its

paternalistic notion that affords some people the right to act to improve the welfare of vulnerable others (Barnett, 2011, p. 12).

Taking Easton-Calabria's argument further, development scholar Clayton Boeyink (2020) emphasises the need for attention to the colonial roots of self-reliance and self-help agendas, which echo paternalistic notions of empire as a 'civilising mission' (Barnett, 2011). In his detailed examination of the displacement architecture of Tanzania, Boeyink argues that these terms evoke the infrastructures of indirect rule and explicitly connects them to the global economic depression of the interwar period, during which British colonial powers sought to reduce expenses while maintaining political influence and maximising returns to the metropole (Boeyink, 2020, pp. 58-60, 196-200).

In global policy discourse, self-reliance functions as an aspirational concept and a pragmatic, if uneasy and power-laden, compromise. Multiple interpretations have coexisted, yet the notion has consistently served donor agendas, often as a mechanism to reduce costs rather than to reflect the realities of displaced populations. Development anthropologist David Mosse (2004) stresses, the elements that contribute to good policy – i.e. political support – often render it fundamentally unimplementable. Good policy is, therefore, performative, not practical. The measure of a policy's 'success' rests on it being politically and institutionally palatable, technically credible, and coherent. Focusing on a 'mobilising metaphor' (Porter, 1995) increases the effectiveness of policy by enabling broad coalitions of support, vague enough to accommodate multiple interpretations and yet powerful enough to provide a 'significant interpretation of events' (Mosse, 2004, p. 656). Mosse (2004, p. 641) argues that commitments to functionalist narratives create a 'black box of unknowing', obscuring the complexities of survival within these systems. Correspondingly, we might consider how this mobilising metaphor impinges on the lived experiences of those registered under this framework as refugees, raising the question of who or what the self-reliance agenda hides or forcibly disappears in specific contexts. The following sub-section reflects on the uneven movement of this mobilising metaphor through Uganda's refugee architecture.

Practising self-reliance in Uganda: a constrained vision

A central framing concept of Uganda's approach to refugee hosting is the aspiration to provide an enabling environment in which refugees can work towards self-reliance. This notion functions as both a shared aim and a unifying principle within policy documentation, forming part of a broader 'refugee journey' envisioned by planners and humanitarian actors. This fits within a longer history of strategic political importance of refugee hosting in Uganda. Political scientist Alexander Betts (2021) demonstrates the persistent importance of refugees in drawing domestic and international support for the government since Uganda's independence in 1962. This forms part of a wider pattern since 1986, whereby the government of Uganda has deployed strategic image management to mobilise funds and political favour across several causes: as a developmental donor darling (Wiegratz, 2010; Wiegratz *et al.,* 2018; Wilson, 2018), as a bulwark of regional stability (Fisher, 2012; Titeca and Fahey, 2016), and as an exemplary proponent of refugee self-reliance. The continued celebration of Uganda's hospitality to refugees has become only more important as a counterbalance to its deteriorating political record, given President Museveni's increasingly authoritarian rule, marked by the killing, torture and imprisonment of opposition figures.

Political scientist Kristof Titeca (2021) further extends this argument to highlight the mutual dependency between international donors and institutions celebrating Uganda as a success story. Despite a major corruption scandal which involved the widespread abuse of funds, food, and other resources, including hundreds of thousands of 'ghost refugees', Uganda has lost little of its shine when it comes to refugee-hosting. Uganda's position as *the model* for UNHCR's flagship CRRF provides the Ugandan government with vital aid and strategic power, as the government is willing and able to periodically threaten donors that they will close up shop if additional support is not forthcoming. Put simply, to answer why this situation continues and why Uganda's reputation persists is that it suits core power holders – namely, the international

community and the government of Uganda.[18] Self-reliance is highly effective as a 'mobilising metaphor' for Uganda's refugee architecture (Porter, 1995).

At a practical level, the structural constraints facing the implementation of globalised policy objectives in Uganda feature heavily in policy documents, which consistently point to limited funding support, land access, and ongoing strains on public service delivery to stress the aspirational nature of these objectives. The land-based model in particular embodies these tensions. While Uganda's refugee policy is widely praised for allowing refugees access to land, the actual allocations are modest at best. Most refugees receive only 30 x 30-meter plots (about 0.22 acres) for residential and subsistence use, and in some settlements, the average size of agricultural land per household is even smaller (Betts *et al.,* 2021; Omata, 2020). The notion that economic self-sufficiency could be achieved primarily through subsistence agriculture was unrealistic from the outset (Betts *et al.,* 2021).[19] Meanwhile, dwindling financial support from international donors further compounds the limits of this approach. This point is well-recognised, for example, UNHCR Uganda's Multi-year Strategy 2023-2025, notes Uganda's model role in refugee hosting before quickly turning to the failings of international responsibility sharing and worsening outcomes for refugees (UNHCR, 2025).

Unsurprisingly, given these structural limitations, a more liberal de jure approach than that of many East African neighbours does not necessarily translate into improved outcomes for refugees' economic stability (Betts *et al.*, 2019). The CRRF in Uganda remains chronically underfunded, and despite nominal commitments to fostering self-reliance, the material resources

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[18] In many ways, evoking the 'too big to fail' notion which gained widespread circulation in the 2007/2008 global financial crisis. The lack of accountability and prosecution concerning the embezzlement of donor funding is a recurrent pattern in Uganda's developmental history – the problem is not isolated to the refugee response (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

[19] The narrative around land allocation to refugees starkly contrasts with the expectations for citizens. While refugees are expected to maintain self-sufficiency on 0.22 acres, the recommended landholding for rural transformation for Ugandan citizens outlines a 4-acre model. Since the 1990s, President Yoweri Museveni has argued that by allocating one acre each to coffee, fruit, food crops, and pasture for zero-grazing livestock, with additional backyard activities such as poultry or fish farming, small-scale Ugandan farmers can generate sufficient annual income to achieve economic self-sufficiency and prosperity (PPU Reporter, n.d.). The contrast between these two models for 'self-reliance' highlights the deeply unrealistic expectations embedded in the refugee model, which asks refugees to achieve economic independence on plots of land that are, at best, just 5.5% of the four acres recommended for citizens.

available to refugees have not substantially increased. As a result, refugees in Uganda face persistent challenges in accessing their rights. Refugee settlements provide minimal infrastructure, and their remote locations create significant barriers to other economic opportunities (Hovil and Okello, 2008). While humanitarian actors promote entrepreneurship and small-scale business, the structural limitations of the settlements constrain the range of viable livelihoods and future opportunities for refugees. Prospects for economic improvement in settlements remain tied to homogenised notions of survivability centred on subsistence farming (Easton-Calabria, 2015, p. 414). The limited resources available provide little more than a means to fend off starvation. Accordingly, whether Uganda's form of self-reliance is practicable within its structural constraints is no longer in doubt – the answer is, by and large, no.

While the practical limits of self-reliance are by now widely acknowledged, despite sustained critique and attention to the corresponding power dynamics of self-reliance, it is often still treated as a bounded policy notion. Yet, as Krause and Schmidt (2019) highlight, the operationalisation of self-reliance carries significant power implications, mediating relations between institutions, intermediaries and refugee populations, and the space for relations of accountability therein. This pervasive idiom structures the work of the leading international institutions in Uganda. In Uganda, UNHCR and WFP, in turn, ensure that the same 'comprehensive' approach is taken up by the various partner INGOS and NGOS operating with refugees. Organisations document persistent efforts to establish frameworks for the measurement of self-reliance, with a view to streamlining reporting processes and turning an abstract policy aspiration into a set of measurable technocratic benchmarks (e.g. AVSI, 2023; UKAID and U-Learn, 2025).[20]

The operationalisation of 'self-reliance' is heavily entwined with donor preferences, which, in turn, have a structuring effect on programmatic activities and reporting. As noted by the UNHCR guidebook *Why Self Reliance,* which situates self-reliance as emerging from donor

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[20] Indicating that the definition and, therefore, measurement of 'self-reliance' is still up for debate, speaking at an opening session of the implementation meeting for the IGAD Kampala Declaration on Livelihoods on September 21, 2023, the Principal Social Development Officer at Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development said: 'We are currently working with partners to develop minimum standard indicators for measuring self-reliance of refugees and host-communities in Uganda'.

interest in 'providing development aid, rather than humanitarian aid, to support refugees in protracted crises', further noting that 'Self-reliance, as the basis for development, is likely to increase donor interest in a programme' (2005, p. 7). UNHCR explicitly aims to 'catalyse the establishment of self-reliance initiatives among operational partners' (*ibid.* p. 9), encouraging organisations to align their programming with developmental objectives and to lobby for corresponding donor and government support. This rhetorical alignment often functions less as an expression of genuine aspiration than as a form of performative compliance (see Li, 2007; Ferguson, 1990), signalling conformity to donor logics and regulatory expectations. Echoing Bhabha's (1994) notion of strategic mimicry, UNHCR advises programmatic partners to adopt the language of self-reliance to navigate asymmetrical power relations, ensuring institutional legitimacy and continued access to funding streams. In a context of shifting funding landscapes and diminishing humanitarian budgets, development-oriented funding streams—often associated with resilience-building, poverty reduction, and national planning frameworks—are increasingly leveraged to supplement or even replace traditional humanitarian financing (Kohlenberger *et al.*, 2025).

This strategic reorientation reflects both the practical exigencies of donor fatigue associated with long-standing displacement contexts and corresponding efforts to reposition refugee assistance within the architecture of development finance. The *Refugee and Host Population Empowerment* (ReHoPE) strategic framework, introduced in 2015, exemplifies this shift, aiming to 'facilitate the gradual transition from humanitarian to development programming in refugee-impacted districts' (UNHCR and WFP, 2016, p. 9). By aligning with the language of resilience and national development planning, initiatives such as ReHoPE reframe refugee hosting as a potential development opportunity rather than a humanitarian burden. This reframing seeks to allow Uganda's refugee response to access more stable and diversified funding sources, while simultaneously entrenching a long-term, developmental mode of refugee governance that reflects the realities of protracted displacement.

Within ReHoPE, self-reliance functions as one of the key organising categories through which stakeholders—including district-level government agencies—are required to report and submit disaggregated data on their activities, alongside 'resilience' and 'humanitarian response' (UN and World Bank Group, 2017, p. 16). One of the framework's central outcomes is the 'development

of district-wide, government-led, multi-stakeholder plans for resilience and self-reliance, aligned with District Development Plans and informed by evidence' (*ibid.*, p. 26). In this way, self-reliance operates not only as a programmatic aspiration but also as an administrative and reporting category that structures coordination between humanitarian and development actors. Its integration into district planning frameworks illustrates how the discourse of self-reliance becomes embedded within local governance systems, translating global policy imperatives into the bureaucratic routines of subnational administration.

However, self-reliance within Uganda's refugee response remains weakly operationalised: while it features prominently in strategic frameworks such as ReHoPE, there is no coherent vision for how it should be enacted in practice (Crawford *et al.*, 2019, p. 14). This lack of clarity is compounded by political and institutional blockages that limit coordination across sectors and levels of governance. As such, although ReHoPE offers illustrative examples of self-reliance as part of the policy agenda, its translation into concrete, sustainable outcomes remains fragmented and uneven. At the same time, repeated efforts to define and measure self-reliance—through indicators, outcome frameworks, and reporting mechanisms—reflect an ongoing attempt to translate an aspirational concept into a concrete policy vision. Despite these efforts, self-reliance continues to function more as a discursive ideal than a consistently achievable objective, unevenly enacted across Uganda's refugee-hosting districts. Within this assemblage, self-reliance travels as a performative discourse: one that organisations, both national and international, strategically reproduce in programme documents, mission statements, and funding proposals, serving as little more than a fictive balm for the international humanitarian order.[21]

The discourse of self-reliance also powerfully shapes the thinking and practices of technocrats and programmatic staff working within Uganda's humanitarian space. Beyond its appearance in policy documents, self-reliance provides a shared vocabulary through which practitioners articulate their objectives and interpret their roles. As a World Food Programme (WFP) staff

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[21] Following International Relations scholar Michael Barnett (2009), I understand the international humanitarian order as the range of actors which claim to work to prevent and alleviate suffering based on an evolving network of norms, institutions, laws and discourses. These actors include states, international-organisations, (I)NGOs and increasingly, community-based organisations.

member in Kampala explained, 'In terms of the policy environment, our goal is to guide you [the refugee] through the refugee journey—from arrival to *self-reliance*, stability, and the ability to live freely in the country' (I-137, emphasis my own). This articulation positions self-reliance as a linear trajectory of progression, discursively framing displacement as a temporary condition to be overcome through the planned and pre-determined sequencing of interventions. Such framings are reproduced through the design of programmes, for example, through the 'graduation' model*,* which translates self-reliance into an operational pathway. In AVSI's programme documentation, this process involves asset transfers, targeted coaching, and the use of predefined criteria for 'graduation' from assistance (AVSI, 2023).

From the moment of a refugee's arrival, Uganda's response architecture is thus presented as enabling a stepwise movement toward socio-economic stability and independence. At the same time, self-reliance exerts a productive power: it structures the design of livelihoods interventions and imposes normative expectations of autonomy, productivity, and entrepreneurialism upon refugees. These expectations are not merely economic but moral and affective, producing a particular kind of 'responsibilised' refugee subject aligned with neoliberal visions of development (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015; Easton-Calabria, 2022). As indicated, the aspirational vision is far from neutral. It obscures the uneven conditions under which refugees pursue livelihoods and overlooks the intra-household power dynamics, gendered divisions of labour, and social dependencies that mediate access to resources. Moreover, the self-reliance framework structures humanitarian operations in tangible ways, with assessments of self-reliance administered at the household level, with a household defined as the registered household unit. This is a core tension registered in Chapter 8, which documents the recent prioritisation exercise in Uganda.

These ideas are pervasive, extending well beyond the domain of refugee governance to shape everyday imaginaries of development and citizenship in Uganda. As Boeyink notes in relation to Tanzania, notions of self-reliance and self-help have long-standing colonial roots (2020). Moreover, given decades of developmental interventions aiming to support Ugandans, as much as refugee populations in the region, it is unsurprising that notions of self-help and self-reliance resonate strongly within local discourses of community responsibility and collective action, informing how marginalised Ugandan communities frame their contributions to public service provision. As Pearson (2015, p. 88) notes that a new ambulance for Obongi health centre IV was

imprinted with: 'Obongi self-help AMBULANCE Purchased by The PEOPLE AND FRIENDS of OBONGI COUNTY'. This vernacular declaration of community mobilisation is a pointed reflection of the experiences of political and economic marginalisation in this remote area, which sits along the west bank of the Albert Nile River in Moyo District, immediately north-east of Rhino Camp Settlement.

Similarly, in Chapter 10 of his PhD thesis, Titeca (2008) documents the activities of two community-based organisations in Wanjapa and Adravu villages, near Arua Municipality, both of which sought to promote self-reliance through localised development initiatives. These examples highlight the moral and political traction of self-reliance as a locally meaningful concept—one that aligns with the state's retreat from direct service delivery. Questions of collective survival in the absence of scaled welfare support have long been a preoccupation of scholarship, which has largely focused on the maintenance and adaptation of forms of mutuality when communities are faced with persistent disruptions to collective and communal ties, and what compromises are made for the sake of community ties (Middleton, 1965; Allen, 1996; Storer, 2020; Hopwood *et al.* 2018; Hopwood and O'Byrne, 2022). Accordingly, this thesis, with its emphasis on lived experiences of practices of self-settlement and 'self-reliance' as a lived practice beyond the settlement and beyond the narrow conceptualisation of self-reliance offered by international institutions, contributes to this scholarship.

The insidious irony of self-reliance is that it is a misnomer. Very often, interventions that claim to promote 'self-reliance' - broadly understood as the ability of individuals to obtain financial independence from aid - undermine the communal and otherwise relational ties that enable independence from external support. For example, Sarah Meyer, based on her study of Imvepi and Ikafe, located just north of Rhino Camp Settlement in Uganda, criticised UNHCR funding of Quick Impact Projects in the 1990s for prioritising immediate impacts with little demonstrable impact or sustainability following the withdrawal of aid. While those living in refuge experience further 'suffering' (Meyer, 2006, p. 1), policymakers and implementers brand these interventions as promoting 'refugee empowerment' (UNHCR and GoU, 2004). In doing so, policymakers and implementers intertwine falsified notions of empowerment with managerial approaches to aid programming, which relentlessly pursue value for money, aligning with their need to appease donors' increasing interest 'in providing development aid rather than humanitarian aid'

(UNHCR, 2005, p. 7). Financial stability is often enabled through mutuality and only enacted through people and networks - see Chapters 7 concerning the mutual negotiations of practices of homing and unhoming in Arua and 8 with the categorisation strategy of the prioritisation exercise.

This section has outlined the growing body of literature situating the long roots of self-reliance as a governance tool, revealing its alignment with neoliberal policy agendas. Self-reliance assumes multiple guises: as a regulatory ideal and an aspirational policy objective, partially institutionalised through the internationalised structuring of refugee governance and donor funding requirements. It is ambiguously defined and operationalised – an elasticity which helps to explain its longevity. It is also part of a wider neoliberal discourse, one that circulates through multiple sites, becoming embedded within mechanisms of discipline and affective regulation at the everyday level. In Chapters 5 and 8, I trace how the language and logic of self-reliance travel as a site of encounter between institutional agendas—those of donors, the Ugandan state, and UNHCR—and the everyday survival practices of refugees. Drawing on Uganda's position as the paradigmatic facilitator of self-reliance, the thesis follows how this policy framework moves through the displacement architecture of northwestern Uganda, shaping both bureaucratic imaginaries and lived realities. Rather than offering a normative diagnosis of the familiar policy–practice gap between aspiration and implementation,[22] this analysis interrogates how self-reliance functions as a mobilising metaphor—how its aspirational quality is maintained, and how the persistence of the gap itself becomes depoliticised or overlooked at key moments of policy articulation. The focus, therefore, is not on whether self-reliance works, but on how it works: how the concept is invoked, circulated, and enforced as an affective and disciplinary frame that organises humanitarian reasoning and refugee life. In methodological terms, the thesis maps outward from the everyday—beginning from lived accounts of self-settled South Sudanese refugees—to illuminate the broader institutional and discursive architectures that shape contemporary socio-economic conditions of refuge.

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[22] For a fuller discussion of the policy practice problematic and ethnography of bureaucracy see Hoag and Hull, 2017.

Beyond silos: spaces and mobility in refuge

This section addresses the literature on spatial technologies of humanitarian governance. Scholarship concerning refugees has tended to concentrate on what are presented as two distinct spatial domains: camps/settlements[23] and urban settings. Each has generated rich and substantial bodies of literature examining the governance, everyday life, and spatial politics of displacement.[24] This spatialised division reflects a broader policy framing that distinguishes between settlement or camp-based refugees – typically governed and assisted through formalised humanitarian architecture – and urban refugees, who are more often conceptualised through paradigms of 'self-reliance' and limited assistance. The siloed treatment of settlement and urban spaces fails to account for the lived realities of those who inhabit and move between these spheres – whose lives are simultaneously shaped by the regulatory logics of both, yet fully encompassed by neither. Addressing this analytical gap, urban geographer Romola Sanyal (2012) highlights the need to draw together understandings of the complex geographies of cities and camps through comparative studies. Similarly, as development anthropologist Tania Kaiser observed, there is a 'more complex and interconnected dynamic than is often assumed' between refugees in and out of the settlement (2006, p. 597). This section draws on these interventions to think about the treatment of self-settled refugees and urban refugees and the insights offered by existing work on refugee mobility in and around settlements, and across international borders.

Despite the prevalence of self-settlement as a practice, it is not an officially recognised term – 'while many self-settled refugees undoubtedly fall under the legal definition of a refugee, they are not officially recognized' (Hovil, 2007, p. 601).[25] In UNHCR's Emergency Handbook, self-settlement is classified as informal accommodation that 'can be located on state-owned, private, or communal land, with or without negotiations with the local population or private landowners'

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[23] Anthropologist Michel Agier famously referred to Africa as a 'continent of camps' (Agier, 2011, p. 3). However, the 'camp' label skirts over diverse forms of containment – some are fenced in, others, as in the settlements of Uganda, have much more porous boundaries. In 1993, Kibreab argued that the distinction between camps and settlements was 'the most sustained single controversy in African Refugee Studies' (p. 324). Summary reviews provide useful reminders about the diversity of spatialised governance structures captured by these labels (see Schmidt, 2006).

[24] See Landau, 2014.

[25] Also known as spontaneous settlement and self-sufficiency.

(2024, p. 3). It is defined by negation, representing the swathes of refugee populations who have not formally registered with the humanitarian infrastructure. I use the term here to describe the conditions of ambiguous legal and administrative status in which these refugees live—outside the formal refugee settlement infrastructure and beyond the designated scope of Uganda's urban refugee policy.

The first sub-section addresses the treatment of self-settled refugees and suggests that the evolving recognition of urban refugees – still relatively recent in terms of formal recognition – offers a lens for understanding the ambiguities of belonging, informality and governance that shape refugee lives. The second sub-section addresses more recent attempts to grapple with refugee mobility and tensions with the presentation of mobility as agency.

Self-settlement in refugee studies

Since the earliest days of formal humanitarian operations on the African continent, international institutions have only catered for a fraction of those living in displacement. Estimates suggest that by 1979, more than 60% of African refugees lived beyond the formal UN and government-defined settlement infrastructure (Eriksson *et al.,* 1981, p. 37). While the practice has received minimal attention from humanitarian practitioners, policymakers, and scholars, senior officials of UN institutions have been aware of self-settled populations since the earliest efforts of UNHCR on the continent. Jacques Cuénod, then UNHCR's regional representative for Africa, wrote that 'many … preferred to settle individually among existing national communities … there are also refugees coming from urban areas who prefer to live in towns' (1966, p. 48). As early as 1968, UNHCR was openly praising the Ugandan government's approach to 'free-livers' who were finding opportunities for employment across the country (Betts, 2021, p. 11). Faced with their own limited budgets and staffing capacity, it is hardly surprising that UNHCR were outwardly supportive of positive, informal examples of rural self-settlement. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, researchers sought to understand how and when self-settlement was possible and preferable. In the rural borderlands of Sierra Leone (Leach, 1992) and Zambia (Bakewell, 1999), self-settlement and integration were well-precedented ways of responding to displacement, and the bureaucratic and social category of refugees was largely meaningless to the people concerned. In contrast to rural settlement programmes, senior UN officials considered self-settlement an effective path to '[integration] into national communities' (Cuénod, 1966, p. 48).

Growing awareness of the scale of 'self-settlement' in rural and urban areas coincided with intense scrutiny of rural settlement programmes. Across East Africa, rural self-settlement schemes failed to support refugees in achieving a basic level of economic independence at scale (Harrell-Bond, 1986). For example, there were multiple cross-cutting migrations of southern Sudanese populations and Ugandans from the 1950s to the 1980s, who established homes for themselves along the Sudan-Uganda border. In 1984, South Sudanese poet Taban Lo-Liyong described the staggered processes by which Ugandans sought safety from the attacks then taking place in West Nile in the 1980s. Many self-identified sites, heading to diverse locations: some went first 'to Kaya, a smuggler's meeting point on the Uganda, Zaire, and the Sudan border… Some headed first for Gulu, and then to Nimule…. On the Sudan side, the old, the infirm, the young, the Madi, Lugbara and Kakwa just walked across, chose a location similar to the one left behind, built huts and began cultivating' (cited by Mark Leopold, 2009, pp. 471-472). Harrell-Bond's research trajectory further illustrates this point. She initially intended that her now-infamous work concerning Ugandan refugee populations in southern Sudan would concentrate on formal settlement spaces. However, when confronted by the scale of self-settlement along the Uganda-Sudan border in the 1980s, she incorporated experiences of Ugandans who had self-settled and were engaged in agriculture on otherwise underutilised land (1986, pp. 32-34, 53-63).

Attention to these alternative settlement strategies is essential to recognising the 'multiple humanitarianisms' that exist outside of the mainstream humanitarian system (Barnett, 2005; Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013). Recent calls for a policy of 'hospitality' (Agier, 2021) articulate the need for alternative narratives of how we theorise acts of humanitarianism beyond the formal humanitarian system. This thesis explicitly engages with the role of households in conducting acts of compassion beyond the institutionalised sphere of humanitarian response (Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013). In this thesis, I aim to strike a balance between recognising the impact of the mainstream humanitarian system and acts that form part of a multitude of 'communities of response' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). In these discussions, I do not wish to romanticise these acts – rather, to recognise their empirical significance and the experiences attached to them.

Self-settlement is not a panacea. As discussed in the following sub-section, reliance on social ties can also generate further exclusion. The levels of comfort experienced by 'self-settled' refugees

varied across time, space, and personal circumstances, depending, for example, on the availability of resources in their host areas, the resources of the refugees themselves, the receptiveness of local communities, and the posture of the host government (see Hovil, 2002, pp. 8-14). Robert Chambers attributed the limits of spontaneous settlement to rapid population growth and the scarcity of land (1986, p. 248).[26] Harrell-Bond noted similar difficulties in the area surrounding Kajo-Keji (see Figure 1), which was stretched to capacity by rapid influxes from Uganda, resulting in recurrent tensions between refugees and local communities (1986, p. 56). These observations led several scholars to make the case for an integrated approach to refugee responses, which factored in their citizen neighbours who faced many of the same problems, particularly 'surplus farmers, subsistence farmers and laborers with negligible or no land' (*ibid.*, p. 249). While self-settlement near border areas allowed displaced populations greater proximity to their farmland, it could also be risky owing to the violent incursions of rebel and government forces (*ibid.*, pp. 58-63).[27]

UNHCR's attitude towards those who self-settled in urban areas was a sharp contrast to their generally positive posture towards rural self-settlement. In 1985, Rogge estimated that as many as 30% of Africa's refugees were located in urban areas across the continent (p. 127). Although governments and international institutions were aware of substantial urban refugee populations across several towns and cities, they refused to formally recognise them. They were what Gaim Kibreab called 'what the eye refuses to see' (1996). UNHCR identified urban residents as a critical problem because 'they usually increase the number of unemployed or underemployed' (Cuénod, 1966, p. 48). The increasingly institutionalised humanitarian infrastructure and host governments oversimplified urban refugee demographics and positioned refugees in urban areas as financial burdens and sources of instability. The denial of formal recognition limited refugees' access to urban services and formal employment. Their ambiguous legal status also left them highly vulnerable to changing political dynamics. Kibreab (1996) observed the manifold ways that Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, were, for a time, unacknowledged and yet accepted. Initially, refugees in Sudan had broadly been accepted at face

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[26] See also, UNHCR, 1968 for discussion of overpopulation in various parts of Uganda relating to self-settlement by Congolese, Rwandese, and Sudanese refugees.

[27] Though settlements were themselves no guarantee of protection from militaristic incursions.

value under UNHCR's 'good offices' doctrine. The 'good offices' approach both sought to 'obviate the need for individual eligibility decisions' and to avoid 'an investigation into the reasons which motivated the departure of refugees from their country of origin' (Cuénod, 1966, p. 1). From 1974, most of the new arrivals from Eritrea and Ethiopia, fleeing repression and violence, self-settled in border towns without external assistance (Kibreab, 1996, p. 141). Over time, self-settlement became increasingly precarious as the central government pursued a hostile agenda, forcibly evicting refugees from Khartoum (*ibid.*, p. 142).

The slow adaptation of humanitarian infrastructure reflected an attempt to suppress the number of displaced persons drawn to the city and economic and political attachment to classical humanitarianism's spatial frameworks. The initial forays by UNHCR in responding to the presence of urban refugees were highly controversial and revealed a disparaging posture towards urban refuge. In March 1997, UNHCR published the Comprehensive Policy on Urban Refugees. In it, UNHCR distinguished between what they called 'irregular movers, refugees belonging to a prima facie caseload and "the legitimate urban caseload"' (1997a, p. 1). Throughout the document, refugees were described in pejorative terms. UNHCR chastised the movement to urban areas and downplayed the scale of the situation worldwide. The document further detailed that 'as a general principle, no assistance should be provided to members of a prima facie caseload in urban areas in the country of first asylum, where a UNHCR assistance programme exists in a rural camp or settlement' (*ibid.*, p. 2). This reflected the state-oriented concerns with control over movement and UNHCR's expertise, which was heavily weighted towards rural settlements. Their narrow conceptions of urban refugee legitimacy extended to prior occupational status – 'an individual of urban origin … anyone who is not a farmer or a peasant' (*ibid.,* p. 2).

The policy was so divisive that by December 1997, UNHCR issued a revised version of only five pages that acknowledged that 'UNHCR's obligations in respect of international protection are not affected by either the location of the refugees or the nature of the movement to that location' (1997b, p. 1). A series of pivotal publications concerning large cities across the continent pushed the issue further. In 2002, Human Rights Watch published 'Hidden in Plain View', which focused on Nairobi and Kampala and emphasised the dire conditions faced by many refugees and the violence they encountered at the hands of criminals, officials, police, and

armed forces. Other works include Burundians in Dar El Salaam (Sommers, 2001) and diverse groups in Johannesburg (Landau, 2006a and b).

Over several decades, scholars have consistently shown that populations in urban areas are diverse and rarely fit within long-standing caricatures of young, male agitators who originated from urban areas (Cooper, 1992; Jacobsen, 2006; Fábos and Kibreab, 2007; Crisp *et al.,* 2012; Landau, 2018). They have instead painted a picture of the diverse characteristics of the populations concerned with equally diverse reasons for taking up city residence. For example, insecurity can drive people to cities in pursuit of anonymity, as can the need to access vital health services, which may not be available in rural settlements. Even where legal entitlements and formal documentation are available to refugees, these do not necessarily guarantee protection or access to vital resources (Landau, 2006a; Sandvik, 2012; HRW, 2002). Refugees, both with and without formal recognition, face insufficient access to affordable and safe shelter. Campbell shows that refugees experience urban inclusion differently according to their class. Eviction drives, extortion, and harassment predominantly affected poorer urban residents in Nairobi (2006, pp. 404-405). Hostile government policies, host communities and even 'protection' agencies contribute to these challenges. For example, in Kampala, UNHCR's urban operations pursued a politics of spatial, material, and administrative disengagement – relocating their offices further away to reduce the likelihood of refugees approaching them (Sandvik, 2012).

The prevalence of self-settlement demonstrates that displaced populations have consistently drawn on diverse strategies to eke out spaces for themselves, challenging the common aspersion that non-citizen populations are burdening local services and economies to the detriment of citizens (Jacobsen, 2006, p. 283). Xenophobic political discourses portray refugees as a physical and socio-economic threat to stability (Amnesty International, 2018; Mohamed, 2018; Al-Ghwell, 2025); however, in urban areas, refugees often find ways to support not only themselves but also extended families. Sociologist Elizabeth Campbell shows that Somali communities contribute to the local economy of Eastleigh, a neighbourhood in Nairobi, Kenya, by drawing on their extensive cattle trade networks in Somalia (2006, p. 405). Scholarship examining the economic lives of refugees details the uneven ways that people are able to mobilise resources through their social networks (Grabska, 2005; Betts *et al.*, 2017) and the ways that they have integrated or been excluded from social life in cities (Hovil, 2007). Beyond formal and informal

employment, refugees often mobilise resources through faith groups (Sommers, 2001; Russell, 2011), refugee community organisations (Lyytinen, 2016), and 'communities of strangers' (Madhavan and Landau, 2011, p. 474).

Eventually, in 2009, UNHCR published their Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas. The document reported that 'almost half of the world's 10.5 million refugees now reside in cities and towns' and recognised urban areas as 'legitimate places for refugees to reside and exercise the rights to which they are entitled' (2009, p. 3). Despite persistent commentary on the existence and diversity of these populations and the adaptive and wide-ranging strategies of people living in displacement, the main infrastructures of humanitarian support on the African continent continue to be 'fundamentally at odds with the way that towns and cities are organised and the way that urban life plays out' (Earle, 2016, p. 80).

Both in policy and scholarship, there remain several important oversights across the literature on displacement to urban areas. Firstly, scholars and policymakers tend to focus almost exclusively on capital cities. Globally, over 60% of refugees live in urban settings (Muggah and Abdenur, 2018). Yet, much of the academic literature and policymaking has focused on a relatively narrow range of cities (particularly capital cities). This is a major theoretical and empirical challenge. Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to account for 34.7% of the world's urban population growth over the next three decades, with urban populations growing at approximately 4% annually - secondary cities will contribute over 50% of this growth (Lamson-Hall *et al.,* 2022, p. 6; OECD/SWAC, 2020). Overlooked and underestimated (De Boeck *et al.,* 2009, pp. 33-35), these towns and cities are critically important because they often play crucial roles in governance, logistics and production at a sub-national and/or regional level (Soi and Nugent, 2017). Though they often lack essential material infrastructures, they can have immensely dynamic local economies and high rates of multi-directional migration (see, for example, Titeca and De Herdt, 2010).

Despite this lack of attention, local municipal governments are increasingly vocal in matters of migration management. In many cases, such as Arua, they are agitating for greater funding and enhanced migration management roles. In 1979, Chambers described rural African refugees as 'what the eye does not see. More than a decade later, Kibreab observed that 'refugees in many of

the African urban centres are what the eye "refuses to see'" (1996, p. 131). To borrow and adapt this phrase once more, the turn of local government towards refugees in smaller towns and cities across the continent raises important questions about *how* and *why* the 'eye now chooses to see' these populations. Through a detailed examination of Arua City, I address this particular question in Chapter 6.

Mobility: Navigating space and survival

This sub-section engages with the mobilities literature as it pertains to patterns of movement during international displacement. While mobility has often been celebrated in both policy and scholarship as evidence of refugee resilience and self-reliance, such framings risk obscuring the structural conditions under which movement occurs. Self-settlement, for instance, is frequently portrayed as a voluntary or entrepreneurial act, yet it is often born of necessity, exclusion, or hope under duress. This section situates mobilities within broader structures of violence and inequality, drawing on scholarship on precarity and survival to emphasise a more nuanced approach to mobility - one that resists its romanticisation as a sign of agency or empowerment.

Despite a sedentarist bias which often portrays migration as a negative phenomenon and a symptom of development failure, anthropological and historical work has shown that mobility is essential to adaptation and life-making among African migrants (Bakewell, 2008a). Pushing back against narratives which subsume 'refugees' as vulnerable, passive recipients of assistance, scholars have argued that mobilities have long been an important practice for managing diverse forms of physical, material, and social dispossession, particularly in borderlands (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Allen, 1996; Bakewell and Bonfiglio, 2013). Substantial proportions of the populations in South Sudan and Uganda have long-standing cross-border connections which predate the establishment of contemporary international borders (Allen, 1993, 1996; Leonardi, 2020). In this border region, as Tim Allen notes, these journeys are rarely 'simple and well-circumscribed' events; instead, they tend to reflect 'an untidy process, involving multiple, and sometimes overlapping migrations in both directions' (1996, p. 7), playing out across varying temporalities, scales, motives, often in response to highly 'unknowable circumstances' (O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2020, p. 749). These dynamic connections have persisted during mass displacement and beyond (Harrell-Bond, 1986; IRRI, 2018b; Schomerus and Titeca, 2012). From this angle, the continued

movement of people in displacement represents an agentic move to maintain well-established strategies for survival.

Movement itself can include moments or encounters with waiting, stuckness, and emplacement. Along the DRC-Uganda border, Nakazibwe and Emmanuel (2023) document the transience of refugees as they respond to highly uncertain and changeable circumstances and the policies which struggle to cope with these everyday practices of mobility. Small-scale movements around settlements and camps also play an important role in accessing key resources and precarious labour opportunities – in the South Sudan-Uganda borderlands (Harrell-Bond, 1986, pp. 241-242; Wilhelm-Solomon, 2016, p. 325; Payne, 1998a; Torre, 2023, pp. 212-216; Gidron, 2025) and Tanzania (Boeyink, 2020, pp. 232-238). Cross-border movement between Uganda and South Sudan forms a vital survival strategy as aid infrastructures wane (Omata and Gidron, 2024) and a way to maintain personal control and engagement with important practices such as funeral rites during protracted displacement (O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2020). However, as anthropologist Yotam Gidron (2025) recently cautioned, it would be a mistake to characterise these movements as expressions of empowered agency. Instead, while 'secondary' movements of displaced populations have increasingly been positioned as opportunity, rather than threat, these portrayals tend to overlook the structural limits informing movement. Drawing on data collected in Kyangwali and Pagirinya refugee settlements in western and northern Uganda (respectively) Gidron draws an important distinction between accumulative and survivalist mobility practices to highlight that movements in refugee settlements are often undertaken as 'desperate tactics for day-to-day survival and the covering of basic needs under conditions of extreme precarity and marginalization' (2025, p. 587), or 'survivalist mobilities'. This offers an important distinction, nonetheless, as I argue in Chapter 7, there is room to engage more closely with the driving factors for mobility, repeat displacements and the risks posed by a *mobilities bias.*

Relational networks for refugees, both among themselves, within and across ethnic groups, and with neighbours and across borders, also offer examples of agentic expression (Stites *et al.,* 2021; Dryden-Peterson, 2006; Lyytinen, 2015; Kaiser *et al.,* 2005; Vancluysen, 2021b). While movement was previously associated with placelessness and detachment from the point of origin, there is now greater recognition of the relational practices of connection or 'moorings' that continue through and beyond movement. From this perspective, mobility and immobility are dynamically

co-constructed. These networks can provide means to secure material and non-material security across space and time. However, even within fraternal networks, these networks can be limited, contingent and exclusionary (Leonardi *et al.,* 2021; Allen, 1996; in this thesis, see Chapter 3). Within this thesis, I caution against any simplistic notions of cross-border fraternity. The contemporary international displacement has drawn people from diverse parts of South Sudan. For many of my South Sudanese interlocutors, this was the first time that they or anyone in their families had travelled to Uganda.[28]

As indicated in the previous sections, the formal humanitarian system is often only a limited part of global displacement experiences. While it receives far less attention, the actions of refugees, between communities and refugees, and what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh calls south-south humanitarianism, make enormous contributions to not only people in displacement, but the places where they seek refuge. Refugees collectively work to improve their circumstances through diverse fora, including Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs), homemaking, and community activities. Organisations created and led by refugees play important roles in catering to community needs (Pincock *et al.,* 2020), including health services (Betts *et al.,* 2021; Brown and Chiavaroli, 2023). RLOs can act as a bridge between external organisations (like NGOs and UN agencies) and offer closer protection and assistance. Even within the formal humanitarian apparatus, refugees play prominent roles in delivering assistance (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014, 2016a, b). Faith-based organisations and cultural bonds are often energetic forms of social mobilisation (Russell, 2011; Storer, 2024). Much of this work is done without international recognition or support, as the structuring of humanitarian governance often excludes small-scale efforts through unattainable demands for accounting, auditing, and compliance, which would enable them to access humanitarian funding (Pincock *et al.,* 2020, p. 2).

Direct financial contributions through remittances can also contribute significantly to refugee well-being and, in turn, to refugee-hosting economies. From 2007 to 2017, $613 billion was transferred as remittances to people facing humanitarian crises (Bryant, 2019, p. 1). This support

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[28] By contrast, scholars focusing on other refugee settlements and linguistic groups originating from the Equatorian region of South Sudan highlighted 'long-standing relationships with Uganda' (see, for example, Torre, 2023, p. 52 and O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2020).

enables displaced individuals to meet a diverse range of essential needs, providing for food, medicines, shelter materials, legal support, school fees, and burial rites (Bryant, 2019, pp. 5-6). In 2016, among the 20 countries receiving the most humanitarian assistance, remittances were valued at more than three times the amount of humanitarian aid received (Development Initiatives, 2018, p. 30). In 2017, remittances worth 202 million USD were transferred from South Sudan to Uganda and 180 million USD from Rwanda (UNHCR, n.d., p. 26). While these figures are not strictly tied to humanitarian displacement, they indicate a significant resource flow connected to these populations. Beyond more readily identifiable forms of coordinated social solidarity and financial transfers, there are daily contributions made financially, socially, materially, and politically that can provide significant immediate support—for example, borrowing maize flour from a neighbour when yours runs short, minding children for a neighbour or relative who must attend a medical appointment or a funeral, and advocating for a fellow refugee who, for any reason, cannot speak up or is not heard.

However, while many of these sources provide compelling examples of refugee-led work, we must carefully attend to the relationship between the informalisation of care work and the absence of material and structural support. As Vancluysen notes, attention to empowerment and the 'agentic' in relation to movement risks overlooking 'the structural inequalities that influence migrants' (lack of) mobility' (2021, p. 22; see also O'Byrne and Ogeno 2020, p. 756). Celebrating the positive impact of refugee and community-led initiatives and acts of mutuality can lead to the outsourcing of protection (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015). This reflects wider trends whereby 'empowerment' is often a translation for the withdrawal of material support and the individualisation of responsibility (Ilcan and Lacey, 2011).

This cautionary note has significant implications for how we frame different forms of mutuality and the limits of the humanitarian infrastructure. There remains a trenchant need, particularly in the border region, to engage more closely with how bureaucratic structures shape the trajectories and implications of movement as they interfere with everyday life. Where people routinely form their own infrastructures of support (Simone, 2004b), these infrastructures are still produced in relation to state and state-like structures, which condition the available spaces for survival structures to exist. Accordingly, we must engage more closely with the multitudinous ways refugees negotiate everyday life under and beyond humanitarian governance. The need for closer

empirical attention to the role of state actors is significant as, in the regional context, states are taking an increasingly active role in the management of refugees, for example, in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and, of course, Uganda (Brankamp, 2019, p. 25).

Studies of the state in humanitarianism have focused on the political goals of states, their restrictive asylum approaches, and harsh security measures. However, a growing body of literature has begun to account for the complex roles of state bureaucracies in refugee and migration management. Drawing on the rich empirical work of scholars (such as Bierschenk and de Sardan, 2014; Czaika and de Haas, 2013; Mbembe, 2001; Mamdani, 2020), who stress the heterogeneity of state actors and infrastructures, scholars of international development have produced rich ethnographic studies of regulatory infrastructures among immigration bureaucrats in South Africa (Hoag, 2011, 2014; Amit and Kriger, 2014), policing in Kakuma (Brankamp, 2019), and the Kenyan government's offices of refugee affairs (Walkey, 2019). Further study is needed on the diverse ways that state bureaucrats and institutions, operating at different levels and across different spaces, impact inclusion and protection.

Moreover, highly politicised narratives present 'forced displacement' and 'voluntary movement' in opposition to (de)legitimise certain types of movement. However, critical scholars have called into question the exceptionality of the conditions of forced displacement (Bakewell and Bonfiglio, 2013). Whether associated with conflict or not, subjective and dynamic constellations of motives prompt movement (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Richmond, 1993; Turton, 2003; Lindley, 2013; Flahaux and de Haas, 2016). Anthropologists Heath Cabot and Georgina Ramsay offer an important perspective on the continuities of diverse forms of dispossession before, during, and after physical dislocation. While 'displacement is often conflated in science scholarship and popular imaginaries with forced migration and involuntary mobility', they choose instead to speak and reckon with the complexities of diverse forms of dispossession which fragment 'communities, economies, political systems, and ecologies' (2021, p. 287). Looking beyond the spectacle of forced displacement as a singular violent event, they argue that displacement often reflects an 'accretion of processes and experiences; alongside the machinations of contemporary capitalism that reinforce partitions around who can access meaningful livelihoods, relations, and full humanity (however defined)' (Cabot and Ramsey, 2021, p. 295).

A growing literature has complexified our understanding of movements concerning settlements – for example, in Uganda alone, scholars have stressed the frequencies of movement in and around settlements (Kaiser, 2006, p. 609; Torre, 2023; Gidron, 2024) and across international borders (O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2021; Gidron and Omata, 2024). Yet, less is known about the complexities of movement, to and from cities and towns. As indicated by the opening vignette, survival strategies for urban refugees often live in legal ambiguity – understanding how and when displaced populations choose to access bureaucratic structures is particularly pertinent. As Bakewell (2014, p. 136) has argued, 'where some refugees from a group settle themselves while others reside in camps, there is evidence … that critical interrelationships can develop between the two spaces with the continuous transfer of people and resources between them'. Moreover, 'there is plenty of room for new approaches that cover the space in between' (*ibid.*). I address this concern through my mobile methods, which are explained in detail in Chapter 2. As anthropologist Pedro Figueiredo Neto put it when tracing the paths of Angolan persons living in displacement along the Angola-Zambia borderlands, 'movement was not only an issue of analysis – or mere tactic – but ended up being a feature of fieldwork' (2019, p. 130).

Debates on mobility in African contexts of displacement often hinge on a tension between survivalist mobilities and mobility as a form of agency. However, drawing on the work of Cameroonian anthropologist, Francis Nyamnjoh, on migration, frontiers and conviviality, this thesis seeks to posit these movements in a nuanced way. Each unfolding with due recognition for class, intersectional positioning, and highly changeable circumstances. In particular, Nyamnjoh's *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (2006) lays a firm foundation by unsettling rigid distinctions between inclusion and exclusion to show how belonging and movement are always negotiated through difference in ways that are inherently fraught, unequal, and incomplete. Drawing on the experiences of the marginalised labourers in South Africa and Botswana, Nyamnjoh illustrates migration as an enduring condition of relational becoming, reaching into the most intimate of shared spaces. This enables us to give due recognition to the difficulties and frictions of these experiences in everyday spaces, moving us toward a more grounded analysis that foregrounds the structural conditions, constraints and lived experiences through which mobility unfolds and is made meaningful.

Such perspectives align well with the recent calls to attend to the accretion of dispossession that shapes (im)mobility over time (Cabot and Ramsay, 2021). This lens is particularly helpful when dealing with movements of diversely situated people that reflect ongoing negotiations of belonging, recognition, and survival within highly unequal political and economic structures. Situating these movements through this lens positions self-settlement not as exceptional but as part of a broader, historically embedded practice of navigating structural exclusion and conditional belonging under conditions of constraint and precarity. Thus, encouraging us to recognise the vitality of survival structures in direct conversation with the structures and material conditions that necessitate them and to understand the forms of mutuality that include and exclude differently situated individuals and communities in dynamic negotiation with state-sanctioned violence and protection.

A critical policy study of self-settlement

Anthropologists of policy and bureaucracy have long emphasised the value of 'following' the policy to understand how interventions are enacted through organisations, hierarchies, and practices (e.g. Mosse, 2004; Hull, 2012). While valuable insights have emerged from studies of African bureaucracies, particularly in showing how policies are reinterpreted and negotiated in everyday institutional settings (Olivier de Sardan, 2008; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014), these approaches remain largely tethered to the presence of institutions and the interpersonal logics that animate them. They excel at analysing what happens within the field of bureaucratic encounter: how rules are interpreted, how informal practices take hold, and how governance operates through negotiation and improvisation.

Building on the anthropology of bureaucracy, which has revealed how policy and administrative systems are enacted through everyday practices, moral negotiations, and material infrastructures (Das, 2006; Gupta, 2012; Hull, 2012), I approach policy from the vantage point of lived experience. Rather than starting from policy as a coherent apparatus of governance, I begin with people's lives — their relationships, frustrations, and aspirations — and consider how policy becomes entangled within them. This orientation draws on scholarship that foregrounds the affective and everyday dimensions of policy, understanding governance as something felt, inhabited, and reworked in intimate spaces (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Lea, 2020). Paying

attention to these affective ecologies reveals policy not as an abstract or external force, but as part of the ordinary textures through which people manage uncertainty.

Methodologically, this is particularly helpful in the case of self-settled refugees living beyond both the settlement system and formal urban refugee policy — as is the case in Arua City — for whom institutional presence is often fragmented, retreating, or absent altogether. It allows an expanded remit beyond what is typically considered 'refugee policy'. Particularly for those living beyond formal humanitarian settlements, refugees' lives are shaped by entangled, sometimes contradictory and often ambient configurations of multiple interventions, histories, and institutional practices. By tracing the lived experience of self-settled refugees, this thesis shows how people, like Yom, are embedded in a broader web of policies, infrastructures, and politics — many of which are not officially designated as 'refugee policy' at all. These include national development strategies, education and health reforms, donor withdrawal trends, and local governance practices. For example, as with Yom's family, when a refugee household is evicted or unable to return to the settlement owing to their inability to pay rent, this does not constitute a direct policy intervention; however, there are clear policy linkages that enable and legitimate such disenfranchisement. Including in that case housing regulations, the colonial foundations of Arua Town and its corresponding socio-spatial arrangement, the contested and partial engagement of INGOs, and the spatially stretched financial resources associated with settlement registration. Refugees in these settings are judged through moral economies of productivity and autonomy; encounter bureaucratic thresholds they cannot cross; and engage with NGOs only partially, intermittently, or informally. These dynamics reflect not the absence of policy, but its diffusion. Refugees navigate these intersecting fields not as passive recipients but as active agents who improvise, resist, and endure within a shifting terrain of support and abandonment. Policy, in this sense, is not a thing to be implemented or evaluated, but a condition to be lived through, sometimes explicitly named, sometimes felt only in its traces.

In these cases, policies themselves are legible less through their directives than through absences, infrastructures, histories, and moral logics. These populations are not always navigating policy so much as they are inhabiting its aftermath, or surviving within spaces where policy is no longer visibly active but still exerts force. This approach, in turn, requires a much broader approach to the actors we take into consideration. Data do not simply follow a policy, but rather build a

constellation of relations encompassing states, NGOs, landlords, informal workers, refugees, infrastructures, environmental conditions, absences, violence, and persistence. This study maps outward from the everyday material realities of self-settlement, and in doing so, encounters self-reliance not as a programme, but as a spectral force. Rather than viewing refugees solely through policy frameworks or abstract theories, it centres the lived realities of people who navigate complex spatial and social landscapes outside formal camps. By examining how refugees in northwestern Uganda claim, contest, and adapt to their environments—while managing limited resources, social networks, and mobility—this research highlights the practical and often creative strategies they employ to survive and build lives. This approach integrates spatial politics and survival practices in a way that reflects the fluid, dynamic, and deeply contextual nature of refuge beyond official settings, while simultaneously thinking carefully about the interfaces with humanitarian infrastructures and how they shape these spaces.

Tess Lea's (2020) formulation of critical policy ecology is helpful here, as it draws attention to the material and affective entanglements through which policy lives on — in bodies, buildings, and relationships — long after its formal articulation. Drawing on ethnographic research with Indigenous communities in Australia, the policy ecology framework illustrates how policies extend beyond written documents into infrastructures, routines, and lived experiences.[29] In doing so, Lea foregrounds the unbounded, material, and relational nature of policy, offering tools to grapple with the complexity of policy saturation across time and space (2020, 2024). As Lea puts it, 'normative definitions of policy artifacts have the advantage of offering a neat approach to this obstinate challenge, whereas policy ecology offers a promiscuous diffusion' (2024, p. 6). Policy artefacts – or policy as commonly understood – are the 'written statements of intent, guidelines, restrictions or dictates', crafted through the realms of hierarchical organisational structures (*ibid.*, p. 3). Artefactual policy is 'usually associated with the governance of people, things, or processes, and with discursive enactments therein' (2024, p. 7). Instead, reckoning with policy saturation, Lea argues for a much broader understanding of the reach of a given policy

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[29] A note on the use of the word ecology as contested. Tess Lea uses it to enlist a 'more expansive sense of entangled intra-active relations between living and non-living assemblies' (2024, p. 2). In this thesis, I do not focus on the environment or environmental policy per se, but the basic principle and limit of refugee hosting in Uganda is anchored in land and its affordances.

artefact, bringing with it further analytical challenges. Where practical norms literature explains how policy is subverted and adapted by actors, policy ecology helps us understand how policy saturates space, haunts everyday life, and survives through absences and expectations.

This approach explicitly engages with the haunting nature of policy – drawing on the Derridean ways that 'past ontologies prefigure – or haunt – future configurations' (2024, p. 4) and how discrete policy artefacts live on through institutions, infrastructures, constraints, habits, social organisation, and relations, reverberating across time and place. This is the analytical frame through which I approach the question of how self-settled refugees experience and seek refuge in Uganda. As Lea argues that we must embrace complexity, 'when policy is understood to be a culturally sanctioned pursuit to s(t)imulate social order, whose material and immaterial instantiations are always wilder in practice' (2024, p. 4; Lea, 2020). Policy is not everything, but it is everywhere. It is not determinate, but conditioning. From this standpoint, the analysis departs from formal bureaucratic formations, political debates, or documents and demands a reorientation towards the unruly ways policy takes shape in practice.

In this context, I draw on Tess Lea's concept of policy ecology as a critical expansion of this earlier work — one that allows us to trace how policy saturates everyday life not only through institutions or norms, but through material environments, infrastructural absences, ambient expectations, and historical residues. Rather than treating policy ecology as a fully explanatory framework, I use it as an invitation to think from a different starting point: not from the policy outward, but from people's everyday worlds inward. This sensitivity aligns with scholarship attentive to how governance is felt and lived and is crucial for understanding the predicaments of self-settled refugees whose lives unfold in the liminal zones of humanitarian governance — neither governed by the settlement regime nor formally included in the urban refugee policy framework. In Uganda, these refugees are often rendered invisible to formal aid systems, yet their lives are anything but untouched by policy. The spatial location of Arua City, adjacent to refugee settlements but outside the scope of the designated 'urban' response, produces a context where humanitarian infrastructures recede, but the logics that underpin them persist. This orientation enables a deeper engagement with the unbounded, contradictory, and often spectral nature of refugee governance in contexts of chronic displacement, partial care, and humanitarian

withdrawal, even more so, with populations situated in the liminal interfaces of statist and humanitarian intervention.

Studies of northern Uganda and its borderlands

As indicated in the above literature review, the displacement and migration literature concerning northern Uganda is extensive. Several early works concerning communities and cultures in West Nile were canonical in shaping discussions of British anthropology, including the work of John Middleton and Aidan Southall. Others, such as Harrell-Bond's 1986 *Imposing Aid*, became landmark texts for Refugee Studies. Over several decades, the rich body of empirical work emerging from this region has consistently challenged narrow conceptual frameworks and transcended disciplinary boundaries. In this sub-section, I wish to highlight two key threads. Firstly, there is a rich history of critique concerning humanitarian responses to forced displacement throughout northern Uganda and its borderlands. Secondly, scholars have taken close empirical approaches to showcase how people construct their own infrastructures of survival amidst conditions of immense precarity. This body of work serves as a vital resource for considering perspectives beyond the realm of the formally recognised international humanitarian system.

Migration has been a continuous feature of most parts of Africa since long before the colonial period (Allen and Turton, 1996). Oral traditions among different communities in Uganda's borderlands, as elsewhere on the continent, highlight mobility and often flight as formative parts of their collective and familial histories (Southall, 1956; Middleton, 1960b, 1965; Allen, 1996; Girling, 1960). These traditions point to diverse motives, including labour migration, pastoralist movements, and relocations due to conflicts, disease, and environmental changes. Middleton's influential studies of Lugbara communities and Southall's study of Alur in Pakwach both highlighted movement as an important factor in the formation of shared identities and practices. Importantly, they point to the adaptive and agentic practices of communities in the absence of and in spite of statist interventions.

The displacement of Ugandans to Sudan in the 1980s was a particularly formative site for refugee studies. As I noted in the introduction, *Imposing Aid* (1986) critiqued traditional frameworks of aid delivery to Ugandans then seeking refuge in Sudan. Many of the critiques

raised by this work have become part of mainstream discourses – stressing the agency and knowledge of refugees, the need to work according to local context and the contributions of refugees to local economies (pp. 331-332), the counterproductive impacts of humanitarian aid agencies (pp. 84-87) and rejecting the self-aggrandising suggestion that humanitarian aid is a motivating factor for movement (pp. 18-20).[30] Return processes, too, were subject to extensive (though uneven) scrutiny. Tim Allen, focusing on Madi areas, questioned the 'voluntariness' of return and documented the immense hardships experienced in the years that followed (1993, 1996). Renowned displacement expert Jeff Crisp highlighted the political preferences for return to West Nile within the newly elected government of Milton Obote and questioned UNHCR's role in that process (1986). As aid agencies waxed and waned in pockets of the north in response to the changing movements and security contexts, Mark Leopold, writing from Arua in the 1990s, accounts for the withdrawal of aid agencies from settlements (2005). Other insightful research traced the effects of exile contributing to rich cross-border economies and urban development in different parts of the sub-region (Meagher, 1990 and, building on this work, Titeca, 2009).

The scale of conflict in this region in the late 1980s through to the early 2000s prompted several critically important studies of responses to displacement in Uganda. The prolonged unrest in southern Sudan and the tens of thousands of Sudanese refugees hosted in refugee settlements and transit camps in Uganda amplified the search for durable solutions (Dryden-Peterson and Hovil, 2004; Hovil, 2007), including handing over responsibility for services to the government of Uganda (Kaiser, 2006). It produced extensive accounts of human rights abuses by not only host governments but also UNHCR and NGOs (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 2005). In Acholi areas of Uganda, the civil war (1986 to 2006) forced 1.6 million to seek shelter in congested Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps (Allen and Vlassenroot, 2010). During this time, continued attacks on IDP and refugee camps by rebel movements from both Uganda and Sudan

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[30] Several internationally renowned scholars followed in Harrell-Bond's footsteps during their time as students on the Refugee Studies Programme. The programme eventually formed the basis of the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University. In 1999, with Professor Joe Oloka-Onyango, Harrell-Bond co-founded the Refugee Law Project, which was based at the University of Makerere. These institutions have contributed immensely to the legal, political, and economic dimensions of refugee studies in the region.

severely undermined any claims by humanitarian or state agencies to offer protection (Kaiser, 2006).

Several scholars produced scathing accounts of the social, economic, and physical violence Ugandans experienced during the displacement at the hands of both government and humanitarian agencies (Finnström, 2008; Dolan, 2009; Branch, 2011), as well as the gaps and failings of return and reintegration programmes (Schomerus and Allen, 2006; Amone-P'Olak, 2007; Allen and Morsink, 1994; Hopwood and Atkinson, 2015). These nuanced accounts also develop a rich critique of romanticised notions of community-led self-help and traditional justice, which underscores the complexities of social healing and inclusion. While international agencies laud localised, community-based frameworks, it is crucial to recognise that they can also perpetuate existing power dynamics, often emphasising social cohesion at the expense of individual needs (Allen, 1988; Porter, 2016; Branch, 2011; Storer, 2020; Victor and Porter, 2017).

Focusing on mass displacement to northern Uganda from South Sudan since 2013, scholars have continued to build on this legacy. The Refugee Studies Centre has produced extensive research on Uganda's refugee architecture and the challenges it faces in accommodating new arrivals, with a particular focus on livelihoods (Betts *et al.,* 2019; Betts, 2021; Omata, 2022). Others have questioned the taken-for-granted assumptions of humanitarian aid infrastructures concerning dependency (Easton-Calabria and Herson, 2020; Tshimba, 2022). Drawing on data collection in northern and southwestern Uganda, extensive examinations of the historical and international political partnerships reveal vested interests in the status quo (Betts, 2021; Titeca, 2021), despite widespread corruption and mismanagement (O'Byrne, 2022). Medical anthropologists focusing on Palabek Refugee Settlement have foregrounded chronic poverty in critiques of global mental health humanitarianism (Torre, 2023) and epidemic preparedness (Mylan, 2025). Importantly, scholars have emphasised the everyday survival strategies of communities before, after and during displacement, of which mobility is an important part. These strategies include practices of split mobility (Kaiser, 2010; Hovil, 2010; Omata and Gidron, 2024); urban place-making (Whyte *et al.*, 2014); localised labour movements (O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2020; Torre, 2023; Gidron, 2024), as well as movements for spiritual, cultural, and personal fulfilment, including death and burial rites (O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2020).

Although refugee experiences in Uganda have been widely studied, this research offers distinct contributions. It examines the topic in the context of Arua City, a secondary city, as an urban context that remains underexplored within refugee and urban studies, thereby extending analysis beyond the capital to capture the dynamics of displacement in emerging urban centres. The study also highlights the persistence of key themes, such as the tension between self-reliance, mobility, and precarity, across time, reframing attention from policy innovation to the endurance and effects of Uganda's long-standing refugee regime. Finally, given Uganda's position as one of the world's major refugee-hosting countries, this study underscores the importance of sustained, situated scholarship that treats such contexts as central to, rather than peripheral in, global discussions of refuge and displacement.

As highlighted in this introductory chapter, despite numerous scholarly critiques, Uganda's refugee response architecture continues to be characterised as a success case. This thesis responds to repeated calls for alternative narratives anchored in people's lived experiences. Taking the failures of policy as a starting point, not as an end point, and working with close accounts of people's lived experiences, this thesis offers a nuanced picture of refugee life in Uganda. It departs from siloed readings of refugee spaces, actors, and temporal frames, instead offering a complex, historically situated account of everyday life under conditions of international refuge. West Nile is a paradigmatic space from which to consider displacement. Reflecting this, the research traces the long, entangled histories of successive displacements to and from the sub-region to the present. It explores the spectral nature of self-reliance—as a global policy construct layered with inherited meanings and historical precedents—and, in doing so, exposes what remains obscured in dominant portrayals of refugee governance. In Tess Lea's terms, this is policy not as programme, but as a lived, relational, and infrastructurally mediated phenomenon, revealing how global aspirations of self-reliance are entangled with local practices of care, survival, and negotiation.

Thesis outline

The thesis structure is as follows. Chapter 2 focuses on the methods of the study. It introduces the core data types and ethical challenges of the research. Importantly, it positions the mobile, multi-sited methodology as a direct response to the mobilities of the South Sudanese interlocutors who engaged with this research.

Chapter 3 situates the self-reliance agenda alongside the longstanding practices of self-management in West Nile. It draws out the manifold ways that Arua town grew in conversation with the recognised humanitarian architecture and with people living in displacement. This historical understanding is fundamental to understanding the continuities and ruptures which inform contemporary refuge, recognising the legacies of policies and interventions undergirding experiences of differential inclusion across class, gender, race, and nationality in Uganda at large and the specific context of Arua.

Chapter 4 examines the structural conditions of the refugee settlement under the oversight of the Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR. It argues that rather than being a place of refuge, the rampant dispossession experienced in the settlement propels onward movement to Arua City. From here, continued links of those who are 'self-settled' in Arua with the settlement represent a fluid claim about resources and survival in what was, at one time, one of the most visible displacement response infrastructures in the world.

Chapter 5 turns to the contemporary urban setting. It examines the role of policy in structuring the terms of inclusion for heterogeneous South Sudanese people in Arua and highlights the adaptive ways that people make ends meet amid an uneven and often unpredictable topography of financial 'independence'.

Chapter 6 focuses on the tensions between the adaptive ways city residents have shaped and reshaped the urban arena and the discourses of bureaucrats and politicians in Arua who seek to assert formal infrastructures in the nascent city. Drawing on Arua's 'refugees' as a form of soft currency, municipal authorities reproduce the well-worn patterns of tokenistic representation and financialised inclusion for refugees.

Chapter 7 examines the infrastructures of mutual obligation that sustain 'self-settlement', placemaking and presence in the city. Focusing on eviction processes and set against a backdrop of bureaucratic neglect, this chapter emphasises the private and profit-making dimensions that affect South Sudanese households' stability within the city.

Chapter 8 focuses on the (mis)management of humanitarian withdrawal as it relates to the role out of differentiated assistance in Uganda. It emphasises the way humanitarian discourses,

including of self-reliance, are mobilised to obscure failings and inflict further harm on refugee populations.

The concluding chapter highlights the core contributions of the thesis. It reflects on the ongoing evisceration of material support for refugees across East Africa and proposes possibilities for further research.

Chapter 2: Methods

This chapter introduces the research sites, data types, and access considerations which informed this research. It positions the spatial scope of the study as emerging directly from the mobilities of the South Sudanese interlocutors involved in this work and discusses relevant ethical considerations.

Introduction

This thesis offers an empirically grounded approach to understanding how South Sudanese individuals navigate a context of presumed self-reliance in West Nile, Uganda. This chapter presents an overview of the types of data utilised in this research, the rationale for site selection, the approach to subjective knowledge, and the limitations of the study. The primary data came from semi-structured interviews and observations. Participants included South Sudanese citizens, Ugandan government bureaucrats, INGO staff, local authorities, Ugandan citizens, politicians, and UN personnel. The research involved 13 months of non-continuous multi-sited data collection in West Nile, carried out between 2022 and 2024. The discussions in this chapter focus in particular on 'ethically important moments,' which are 'the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 262).

Movement as method

In 2018, I spent several formative months in Gulu Town (now Gulu City) working on a collaborative long-term study of the effects of conflict in the northern region (Allen *et al.,* 2020; Parker *et al.,* 2021). By then, the refugee response in northern Uganda was well-established. Hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese people were residing in settlements across northern Uganda. From Gulu, I observed how freedom of movement played out in practice. Many residents in Gulu could point you toward a neighbour or a locality where South Sudanese individuals were known to reside, suggesting significant movement beyond the sites of refugee registration. Similarly, from Palabek Refugee Settlement, a two-hour drive north of Gulu, it was evident that people moved for various reasons and by different means (O'Byrne and Ogeno,

2020; Torre, 2023, p. 84).[31] Yet, when I tried to discuss this movement, government officials, friends, and NGO staff repeatedly emphasised that beyond Kampala, refugees were spatially confined within the settlements.

Despite the noted generosity of Uganda's approach to the movement of refugees and asylum seekers, when asked about the presence of 'urban refugees', technocratic and political actors would echo the sentiment that the only 'urban refugees' in Uganda are those in Kampala. Although Uganda's refugee act explicitly affords refugees the right to 'freedom of movement', the enactment of that right appeared to be escaping the purview of humanitarian, developmental, and governmental actors, with important implications for service provision capacities for citizens and non-citizens alike. This disconnect raised several questions: Why were these populations being overlooked? Why obscure their movements? Was this approach somehow beneficial? Did it simply not matter? Regardless of the motive, this denial carried significant implications.

Between my early experiences in Uganda and starting data collection for this thesis, the research was postponed due to personal circumstances (not least the birth of my daughter) and the various lockdowns associated with COVID-19, with important implications for the project. In the intervening years, I observed from a distance as city and municipal government bodies gained international attention for responding to the gaps in national-level state social service provisioning for migrants and refugees (Lock, 2020). In Uganda, local government's posturing around refugees often contradicted national-level government policy by suggesting their openness to the presence of self-settled refugees (Daily Monitor, 2020) – particularly in Koboko municipality (Monitor, 2016) and in Arua (Uganda Radio Network, 2021). These statements were a potentially significant challenge to the national government's centralised allocation of resources for the refugee response.

Anthropologist Laura Nader's hugely influential advocacy of 'studying up' (1969) was a resounding call for academics to redirect their attention towards the middle and upper ends of

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[31] At the time, colleagues of mine were working in Palabek refugee settlement, two hours north of Gulu. This was the first time I had been to a formally designated space for refugees. At the time, it was populated by predominantly Acholi-speaking South Sudanese people and, as a newly formed settlement, was regarded by many as one of the better-organised settlements in Uganda.

social hierarchies. While studying the lives of the oppressed and marginalised is valuable, Nader emphasises the urgency of studying power as it plays out through the actions and influences of institutions, elites, and structures. Other scholars, introduced in the opening chapter, had also demonstrated the immense value of engaging with African state bureaucrats in practices of everyday migration management (in South Africa - Hoag 2011, 2014; and in Kenya - Walkey, 2019). For my topic, these were important interventions. Where city governments were positioning themselves, in collaboration with urban-focused UN agencies, as more grounded and flexible forms of state government, I wanted to understand *how* local governments were attending to these additional populations in Uganda. From the limited impressions I had at the time, advocacy for the inclusion of refugees in the city seemed to lack the participation of South Sudanese or Congolese residents. The calls followed a top-down directionality, focusing almost exclusively on the pressures refugees placed on city infrastructures.

When refining the parameters of the study, a series of research initiatives and news articles encouraged me to shift my focus to West Nile and, in particular, to Arua City. In 2018, AGORA conducted twelve profiling studies of different areas in Arua Town and its surroundings. Building on a 2017 study by the International Rescue Committee, the profiles documented localised service access and demographic data in detail (ACTED *et al.,* 2018a-i). Following this, in 2020, a study of Arua City Central Division revealed that one in ten individuals was a refugee (AVSI Foundation *et al.,* 2020, p. 3). These reports provided a clear indication of a substantial refugee population residing within the city boundaries. At the same time, the City government emerged as a prominent advocate for a review of the urban refugee policy in Uganda. By shifting my focus away from Gulu City to Arua, I was transitioning from the former centre of humanitarian assistance in Uganda to a contemporary one. Although Arua Municipality had also developed a longstanding displacement response architecture, it did not attract international attention and funding in the way that Gulu had in the early 2000s. Nonetheless, as has been noted by scholars in relation to other East African cities, including Gulu and Goma (Büscher and Vlassenroot, 2009; Büscher *et al.,* 2018), the formalised response to displacement has been a major contributor to the pace and particular dynamics of urbanisation in Arua. Since the 1990s, the humanitarian response infrastructure has been an important source of formal employment for West Nile's middle class.

With regard to the contemporary displacement, from early 2014 to 2016, displacement from South Sudan into Uganda remained at around 200,000. However, the scale-up in violence from 2016 propelled hundreds of thousands more over the border, such that by August 2017, there were approximately 785,000 documented South Sudanese refugees in Uganda.[32] The concentration of displaced populations in West Nile led to a concomitant expansion of the aid architecture in Arua town.

Despite the rich academic history and the sheer scale of displacement in the sub-region, in the early stages of my work, acquaintances in Kampala emphasised that going to West Nile was unnecessary. Several Kampala-based Ugandan staff members of reputable INGOs argued this for two reasons. Firstly, if I were interested in urban refugees, they explained that I need not go to Arua because 'the refugees in town all have money' (I-129). I take up this misguided assumption in Chapter 5. Secondly, they stressed the difficulties of working in West Nile. As one noted, contrasting the sub-region with the rest of Uganda, 'West Nile has three rules: who you know, what to say, and how to say it' (I-153). These sentiments reflect the discourse of marginality that circulates around West Nile (Leopold, 2005).

The complex roots of this stem in large part from the legacy of association with President Idi Amin, who was reportedly born in Koboko, and the subsequent violent displacement of West Nilers from Uganda in the 1980s. The sub-region has consistently faced among the highest poverty rates in Uganda. West Nile only received electricity in 1998, and even then, it was not connected to the national grid. As a result, the power supply was insufficient for industry (Titeca, 2008, p. 134) – an issue which continued to surface throughout my data collection. As documented by both Meagher and Titeca, cross-border economic activity became a vital resource amidst constrained alternatives. Undoubtedly, the 420 km journey between Kampala and Arua adds to this distancing, as does the relatively poor state of the roads within West Nile. Storer points out, among Lugbarati communities, Kampala is referred to as 'lire' (that place) accessed 'ma mu yi' (by going over the water) (2020, p. 48). However, as Betts (2021)

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[32] Inflated figures suggested that there were around 1,000,000 South Sudanese refugees at that time, but the formal verification exercise identified the widespread inclusion of ghost refugees, and in 2018, the actual number decreased to around 785,000.

convincingly argues, far from being marginal, West Nile has been a constitutive part of the national political order for several decades.

Despite a well-established aid architecture in Arua, the institutional arrangements which facilitated the exclusive focus on bureaucratic engagement with refugee and migrant affairs in the work of Hoag and Walkey - the Immigration Services Branch Department for Home Affairs and the offices of the Refugees Affairs Secretariat in Nairobi, Kenya - were unidentifiable in Arua. This is unsurprising given the denial at a national level of the status of 'urban' refugees outside the capital. The absence of a coordinated or established approach and the co-existing preoccupations of the city government with coping with the concurrent dramatic expansion of the municipality meant that strictly focusing on 'city-level' government bureaucracy would have been to deny the realities at hand. My early conversations with state technocrats in Arua revealed interest but minimal depth in understanding their non-citizen populations.[33] Though there was verbal recourse to refugee presence in schools and clinics across Arua City, substantive engagement with refugees at the middle-management level was superficial at best. Municipal department managers were singularly preoccupied by the lack of data concerning the scale of the 'problem' (I-121, 147, 164).[34] From their perspective, as the budgets for city offices are allocated in accordance with the Ugandan citizen population data from the national census, this creates potential shortfalls. The budgets for refugee facilities (i.e. those in settlements) are determined separately from national budgets, for example, for health and education.[35] As described in Chapter 3, the presence of unaccounted-for refugees was straining road infrastructures, waste management, health, and education facilities, but without knowledge of the figures, they were unable to advocate to the central government effectively for a change in approach.

As a result, I began reorienting my work to reflect South Sudanese people's dispersed use of state-led services, markets, and housing. Following the influential insights of anthropologist George Marcus, I adopted a multi-sited approach to follow people, connections, metaphors,

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[33] Despite concerted efforts to promote refugee inclusion at the municipal level, as evidenced by reporting on the Municipal Development Forum initiative by Cities Alliance (2021, pp. 26-28).
[34] As discussed in interviews with the HR, IT and Education officers working at the city level.
[35] The most recent census counted refugees – this is significant for planning futures.

things, and associations across space (1995, pp. 106-110). This approach has become increasingly important in migration scholarship, where systems and policies sometimes play out across vast intercontinental networks, and experiences are not place-bound but trans-local (Chalfin, 2010; Andersson, 2014). To understand South Sudanese experiences in Arua, I had to follow the people who, in turn, traced the spatial boundaries of the humanitarian bureaucracy.

In particular, their ongoing bureaucratic, relational, spatial, and economic engagement with 'the camp' drew me into a stretched conception of urban habitation where neither the urban nor the camp represents contained spaces – through people and goods, they are 'routinely implicated in distant connections and influences' (Amin, 2004, p. 33). Following the lead of South Sudanese city residents expanded the scope of my sites in ways that better account for 'the real, every day and gradual ways [displacement] is often negotiated' (Vaz-Jones, 2018, p. 712). I traced the movements of South Sudanese persons between the camp and the city –orienting my journeys, like many of theirs, around the food distribution days in the various zones of the settlement (see Chapter 4). As well as these more significant scale movements, within the city, I moved between schools, homes, community association meetings, churches and across multiple, overlapping networks of municipality-level bureaucrats, local authorities, national authorities, and international humanitarian-developmental staff, for example, in inter-organisational events and coordination meetings. Re-spatialising the research in accordance with South Sudanese people's encounters with various aspects of Ugandan and international bureaucracies enabled a rich account of the ways 'self-reliance' is experienced and enacted across stretched spatial landscapes. This has helped me to partially overcome the artificial urban-rural divides and dichotomies often reinstated through research practice.

The high degree of mobility between settlements and the city and across international borders is enabled and often tacitly encouraged by authorities in both Arua and the settlements. This sometimes posed a challenge for consistent engagement with interlocutors. In response to finding only half of the interlocutors we sought to approach at home that day, one of my Ugandan colleagues commented, 'These refugees are always moving.' Often, the nominal head of the household is occupied elsewhere, reflecting the extensive spatial connections South Sudanese people usually have. Nonetheless, the notion that South Sudanese refugees move notably more than Ugandan citizens is misleading. Leopold noted similar difficulties engaging

citizen interviewees in Arua Town in the 1990s, observing that these mobilities reflected residents' close links with the 'rural hinterland ... [and] the wider world' (2001, p. 34).

Places

The Parliament of Uganda officially declared Arua a regional city in April 2020. It was one of fifteen municipalities across the country granted city status. It became operational in July 2020. Arua City comprises two divisions, Arua Central and Ayivu, which include 459 cells spread over 49 wards across an area of 413.7 km².[36] The city's boundaries, under this definition, extend to the border with the DRC. The city contains three constituencies: Arua Central, Ayivu West, and Ayivu East. Geographically, the city covers disparate areas populated by rural homesteads and agricultural land, as well as hotels, shops, and regional offices of state and international organisations. Arua is well-connected to its rural surrounds, where many are involved in subsistence farming. The economy of Arua plays an important role in the dynamic borderland, including trade in staple goods such as cassava flour, fish and vegetables and more lucrative goods like gold, oil, and tobacco. The city offers a relatively stable conduit for business across the borders with South Sudan and Congo.

Over the last decade, the scaled-up response to displacement from South Sudan has drawn aid agencies' attention to Arua, resulting in job creation, additional funding, and increased demand for local resources. Many wealthier city residents have constructed new buildings to cater to the influx of organisations that have arrived to administer the humanitarian response. Although these infrastructures remain markedly detached from the everyday life of the city, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5, they are intimately embedded in the economic fabric of the city. The imprint of these infrastructures mirrors that of the former colonial administration. Aid agencies, international institutions, and Ugandan government offices occupy the areas around

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[36] The city's expansion controversially annexed several surrounding sub-counties, leaving the former Arua District a meagre size. The city continued to be a source of contention - a few months prior to my arrival, disgruntled residents physically assaulted the planner they held responsible for the restructuring. Elders from Ayivu division were also mobilising in opposition. Previous attempts to expand the municipality resulted in extensive protests from the Ayivu community, who perceived this as a way for the Aringa community to assert control of Ayivu land (Titeca, 2008, pp. 132-133). Later chapters explore these tensions – which reflect the complex specificities of identity and power in Arua – in more detail.

Arua golf course and Mvara. It is a highly political and visible enmeshment of aid: the roads surrounding the golf course are densely filled with humanitarian paraphernalia.

As well as the creation of new jobs through donor-funded opportunities and the indirect consequences of humanitarian presence, South Sudanese populations themselves have dramatically reshaped the urban environment. The effects of the aid economy and these displaced populations on the urban centres across West Nile are well recognised. North of Arua town, both Koboko and Yumbe also have substantial populations of South Sudanese. An older Ugandan resident discussing the changes to urban areas since the outbreak of the South Sudanese civil war commented, 'Even if you go to Koboko, you find the town has grown very much – [displacement] has created job opportunities – NGOs, and the presence of [South] Sudanese, and when they go back, I do not know. We have to wait and see, but definitely, it will affect job opportunities for people and businesses' (I-134).

Though this thesis does not focus explicitly on the rich and diverse lives and infrastructures that shape settlement spaces,[37] the camp is a formative space in dynamic exchange with widely dispersed relational and material networks across Uganda. My choice to focus on Rhino Camp Settlement (RCS) was primarily driven by the frequency with which I interfaced with people in Arua City who were bureaucratically connected to RCS - all my early interlocutors were linked to RCS. VNG International later indicated that over 72% of refugees in Arua City are affiliated with RCS (2024, p. 55).

Formally established in 1980 as an interim transit camp,[38] the origins of the name relate to Rhino Camp Sub-County, which neighbours RCS and is situated along the Western bank of the White Nile. In the early twentieth century, this area drew intense fascination owing to the lucrative illegal trade in ivory. Under Belgian and early British colonial oversight, hunters, including US President Theodore Roosevelt (Heller and Roosevelt, 1913), travelled to West Nile in pursuit of elephants and a now-extinct population of wild White Rhinos. Apart from villages along the

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[37] See Torre, 2023; Mylan, 2025; O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2020.
[38] Local Ugandan residents pointed to a longer informal history of accommodation of Congolese communities since at least the 1960s.

Nile, throughout the twentieth century, the area that now demarcates the settlement was not intensely domesticated. Ample land availability and proximity to riverine opportunities contributed to a rich legacy of migration in the area. Though an in-depth history of the area is beyond the scope of this thesis, the complex tapestry of heritage claimed by people in and around the settlement is an indication of its migratory legacy (see also Pearson, 2015; Allen, 1996).

Approximately 70.2km from Arua City (VNG International, 2024, p. 56), RCS covers a total area of 85.5 km²; only 5.503 km² is designated as the settlement absorption area (see Figure 4). This area contains seven zones and forty-two villages. The tract of land local leaders bequeathed for refugee-hosting comprises mainly underutilised scrub land. Since its origins as a transit camp, RCS has been expanded several times to cope with the influxes associated with the South Sudanese civil war. Owing to district creation, RCS, which is under the oversight of the West Nile OPM sub-office, now sits astride Rigbo sub-county, Madi-Okollo district, and Odupi, Omugo, and Uriama sub-counties in Terego district. As of June 2022, RCS was home to 136,901 refugees (UNHCR, 2022a). This makes it among the most populated refugee settlements in Uganda. Over 95% of those bureaucratically registered as refugees within the camp are South Sudanese (UNHCR, 2024c, p. 9). Covering a large expanse and interspersed by refugee and host community villages, for outsiders, it can be difficult to distinguish between host and refugee settings when moving through the settlement. The differing frequencies of language I heard while passing through the settlement helped in this task. Ugandan children typically referred to me as 'mundu' (perhaps derived from the Lingala word for rifle), while, for the most part, South Sudanese children employed the Juba Arabic term for white person - 'kawaja'.

The western fringes of the settlement are approximately a one-hour journey by car from Arua City, the sub-regional capital of West Nile. From the main access route via Kampala Road, there are multiple entry points into RCS. The main road (Rhino Camp Road), which begins in the heart of Arua City, passes through the West of the city. The conditions of the marram roads that lead to the settlement from the city vary with traffic and weather, and depending on how recently maintenance work has been carried out, an issue which is dependent on the availability of donor funding (UNHCR, 2023e). Due to their speed, the four-by-fours used by government staff, aid agencies, and international institutions kicked up enormous amounts of dust for other

road users. The journey is uncomfortable. Late in the year, the accumulated effect of heavy downpours worsened driving conditions, so much so that some areas would become almost impassable by anything other than a motorbike. The road leading to the base camp at Yoro was often in a much better condition than others within the camp, owing to the work of an elderly gentleman who would come down from his wheelchair to maintain the road by hand, relying on the voluntary contributions of passersby as payment for his efforts.

The remote location of settlements such as RCS is a critical barrier to economic activity as settlement residents face spatial marginalisation with limited access to markets and higher risks of insecurity (Kaiser, 2006, p. 601). Within the predominantly rural settlement, several small urban centres feature small-scale restaurants, healthcare facilities, and small shops. The primary economic activity in the area is agriculture; however, the assertion of ownership by neighbouring Ugandans limits access to opportunities for non-citizens. Registered refugee households are each allocated a plot in the settlement, but they have limited prospects for obtaining additional land for farming or making other claims over locally available resources – such as fishing.[39]

While the relative generosity of national host populations should not be understated, it is also true that much of this overgrown, undulating terrain has been sparsely populated since around the 1960s. A member of Rhino Camp Town Council explained to me that the availability of land in the area was a key determinant for the location of the settlement, but its availability reflected its relative isolation and relatively infertile land (I-173). Several of the zones face difficult agricultural climates. Ofua (Zone VI), the most Western part of the settlement, is characterised by steep inclines that expose rocky outcrops. Eden (Zone III) often floods. Tika (Zone IV), where I spent much of my time, is predominantly dry and sandy. With the arrival of refugees and the establishment of formal settlement infrastructures, aid injections and increased population densities created new opportunities for poorly resourced Ugandans who found new possibilities for service access. As one South Sudanese interlocutor noted, 'Even the Madi came into the settlement. Before the settlement, people lived along the Nile; they were not staying here in

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[39] An activity which local populations along the banks of West Nile regarded as low-status and risky (Pearson, 2015, pp. 41-42).

Rhino settlement because there was no water, taps, or health centres. It was just for animals' (I-34).

In total, I spent one month in RCS, split across several shorter trips.[40] My trips to RCS were mostly oriented around distribution days, when many households would attend the food distribution points (FDP) in the settlement. I aimed to mirror the regularity of the trips city residents themselves were making. I often extended these trips by a few days to spend more time observing the distribution before and after, and better understand the settlement. While most would try to come and return to the city within the same day, it was common for people to stay longer, for example, visiting friends or relatives or dealing with an administrative or practical issue.

Data summary

In-person data collection began in May 2022 and continued until March 2024.[41] The empirical material revolves around semi-structured interviews with 223 participants, informal conversations, observations, seven focus group discussions, archival data, and policy documents (see Appendix A – Data). I used snowball sampling and purposive sampling for specific key informants for the semi-structured interviews. The participants and interlocutors included South Sudanese people, both registered and unregistered as refugees, settlement staff, settlement community leaders, local and national government bureaucrats, local politicians, religious leaders, Ugandan neighbours, clinicians, educators, and staff of NGOs and international institutions.

A total of 223 participants took part in interviews for this research, comprising 122 South Sudanese (83 women, 39 men), 88 Ugandans (18 women, 80 men), and 13 international participants. Overall, 159 interviews were held in Arua, 28 in Gulu and 18 in Rhino Camp settlement. Additional interviews were held in Kampala and Imvepi. Ten further interviews were held remotely. South Sudanese participants were largely recruited through community groups,

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[40] I also visited Imvepi (see Brown and Chiavaroli, 2023).
[41] May-November 2022; March-April 2023; June-August 2023; February-March 2024. In October 2022 I spent one week in Juba, South Sudan attending the Safety of Strangers conference. I also returned to Uganda in November 2024 and had the opportunity to share my preliminary findings.

neighbours, and religious affiliations. Others introduced themselves to me during the course of the research and were keen to participate.

Although the refugee population of Arua is diverse, in this thesis, I focus primarily on the experience of South Sudanese refugees. Focusing on South Sudanese experiences, as opposed to Congolese or any other nationality, was an important step in refining my research. Of the 24,000 self-declared refugees living in Arua City (2024, p.42), over 80% are South Sudanese. Although there are many similarities in challenges faced by Congolese residents of the city,[42] their experiences differ in important ways. Many Congolese households are from areas very close to the border of north-western Uganda, with the Congo border just a 20-minute drive from the centre of town. There is also a high number of day commuters who move regularly between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In contrast, many of the South Sudanese households in Arua had travelled to Uganda from regions hundreds of kilometres away. Moreover, focusing on one population group allows greater space to the specific ethno-political and classed associations that nuance South Sudanese experiences of displacement and settlement.

Within this grouping, during interviews I included any who self-identified as refugees, recognising that this may not always mean they are officially registered as such. I further refined the scope of the study to focus on South Sudanese who registered to RCS. This reflected the fact that most registrations in Arua by refugees are to RCS. As VNG found, over 72% of the refugees in Arua City were affiliated with RCS (*ibid.* p. 55). All the stories included in this study were about the people formally registered to refugee settlements, or in the process of trying to re-establish their formal registration. Though I ultimately focused on those who maintained connections with RCS, I did not exclude people who were not officially registered as refugees, particularly as they were often members of households where others were registered. Nor did I exclude those who were registered to other settlements, as was occasionally the case.

This thesis recognises that intersecting characteristics, including but not limited to age, gender, class, bodily appearance, legal status, and ethnicity, may shape people's experiences of self-

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[42] Observed during meetings of community representation with city officials.

settlement. During this research, I included participants across a wide range of characteristics to build an understanding of variation in experience. The participants of this study reflected diverse social positions and experiences across class, gender, geography, and identity. While I do not emphasise these characteristics more than others, my analysis emphasises the changeability of individual circumstances and tries to point to the ways that the complexity of people's socioeconomic circumstances, residencies and stretched spatial ties, gendered dynamics, and individual experiences shape their experiences of displacement.

Owing to the relatively unknown characteristics of the refugee populations in Gulu and Arua, the research began with 51 scoping interviews, 33 in Arua, 13 in Gulu. None of the scoping interviews was used for the core empirical material. However, this stage was vital for mapping out some basic information for the research process. On occasion, to clarify data and further discuss emerging themes, I conducted repeat interviews with some participants. This resulted in 13 participants with multiple semi-structured interviews. Several others were engaged in more informal conversations and follow-up discussions.

A total of 101 women and 122 men participated in the interviews. The gender imbalances in the respective nationality groups interviewed as part of this research reflect the disproportionate number of leadership positions held by men in the research area. Similarly, the relative dominance of women among the South Sudanese participants reflects the prominence of women heading households in displacement.

Most of the South Sudanese research participants arrived in Uganda from South Sudan since the outbreak of war in 2013. However, this was not always the case – some had been living in Uganda for over a decade at the point of the data collection. Others arrived during the research (see, for example, Jimmy's experiences of registration in Chapter 8). Where relevant, I have noted these instances. Several of these long-standing residents of Arua City had pre-established connections to the town, often via relatives and extended family. Others might be considered part of the wave of military families which began to arrive in Arua soon after South Sudan gained independence. As detailed in Chapter 5, this period was particularly formative for everyday narratives and perceptions of South Sudanese wealth in Arua City.

Distinguishing participants by nationality alone cannot do justice to the diversity represented within this research. The study includes contributions from individuals who identify with a wide range of South Sudanese ethnic groups, including Acholi, Dinka, Kakwa, Moru, Murle, and Nuer, among others. Participants originate from multiple regions of South Sudan and maintain complex geographic, kinship, and linguistic attachments that resist simple categorisation. Recognising this, it is therefore important to approach summary ethnic affiliations with caution. Dinka associational life in Arua City, for example, reflects significant internal differentiation, with separate groups formed around Warrap, Twic, Bor, Abyei, Awil, and several other localised identities. Moreover, participation in these associations does not map neatly onto fixed ethnic boundaries: kinship relations often shape involvement, such that married women may join the ethnic association linked to their husband's lineage in addition to, or sometimes instead of, their natal group. I return briefly to these associational dynamics in Chapter 6, where I examine their complex role in shaping questions of refugee representation.

Research collaboration was essential for this work, not least because of the challenges of working across multiple languages and spaces. The resultant data reflect the intersubjective production of knowledge (Jackson, 1998). I often had conversations with the relevant co-researcher about the interview/observation. They frequently provided keen insight into the dynamics of the interview. Several were experienced researchers before their involvement in this project, and all were very active in multiple informal and formal capacities across expansive relational networks. As residents or former residents of the places I worked in, their insights were invaluable. The suitability of individual researchers varied according to the research focus and shaped who I collaborated with at different moments. Language differences dictated some of this, as did individual comfort with the presence of the specific translator. For example, women sometimes expressed a preference for a woman to translate to facilitate more detailed answers to more personal questions. Though many interviews were conducted in English, many were translated from Juba Arabic, ThongJieng, Nuer, Lugbarati, Acholi, and Kakwa.[43] I worked with several people to facilitate the research: Abonga Francis, Joseph Ajok, Elijah Akom, Osuta Jimmy, Siasa Consolate, Thiik Machol, Patricia Nyivuru, John Ater Bol, Monday Ayikoru, David Angualia,

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[43] Additional clarification regarding the practicalities of working with research colleagues is provided in Appendix A.

Mariako Patrick and Charles Ogeno contributed to interviews and exchanges which informed this thesis. Thiik Machol, whom I met serendipitously at the OPM Arua offices in late June 2022, was a particularly crucial collaborator. As well as facilitating introductions, he was a source of critical guidance throughout the research, not least by answering innumerable questions and providing incisive commentary and friendship.

The different phases of my research can broadly be mapped to each period of in-person data collection. The early months of the first phase revolved around procedural and relational access negotiations, completing the extensive bureaucratic labour of formal ethical requirements and mapping the various interfaces between non-citizens and government-led institutions. I conducted many household visits through different community groups and religious affiliations to ensure diversity across the interview respondents. Conducting household visits was particularly important to ensure women, who often hold demanding roles as caregivers, were able to participate in the research. These home visits also provided a more intimate context for our interactions and allowed me to observe the material conditions of their living environments firsthand. Over time, I engaged more deeply with the exchanges and movements between the camp and the city, tracing the dense relational webs connecting people and spaces.

In early 2023, I turned towards the restructuring of ongoing monthly food support in Uganda. Under the prioritisation exercise, for the first time since the outbreak of the 2013 conflict, WFP would no longer distribute General Food and cash Assistance (GFA) to all refugee households. The processes which unfolded around this drew into focus the ambiguous dynamics and constellations of power dictating refugee governance across space and time. In June 2023, I attended a workshop in Koboko concerning migration to secondary cities with actors from across East Africa.[44] This allowed me to contextualise the specific politics of Arua, observing the stark political and technical differences between Koboko and Arua, which manifested materially in the infrastructures of the two spaces. Koboko, by contrast to Arua, has benefited from

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[44] Cities Alliance define secondary cities as 'medium-sized administrative, political, industrial, military, transportation, tourism, and historical centres which function at a level below primate order or metropolitan region cities. They range in population from 100,000 to 2.5 million but may be larger or smaller depending on the size of a nation's population' (2019, p. 17).

significant investments in health care, education, and livelihood infrastructure (Cities Alliance, 2023).[45]

From July to August 2024, I returned with my daughter. Upon arriving in Arua, we found half of the family members with whom we were due to stay had suddenly left for South Sudan to respond to a health crisis. Situated within the same compound in a neighbouring rental unit, I remained partially responsible for several children who remained in Arua. At their mother's request, I became a temporary node within the infrastructure of familial responsibility. Though this meant less time for the mobile orientation of my earlier approach, it opened opportunities to intimately understand the everyday navigations of relational responsibilities across geographical space, including facilitating doctors' appointments and school visitations.[46]

The final in-person phase of research, conducted February-March 2024, closely informs Chapter 8. At the time, the material infrastructure of the settlement bore witness to the decay of donor-led refugee governance and support infrastructures and the relational dynamics in conditions of abandonment. My arrival in the settlement followed a storm that caused widespread damage to housing (see Figure 5). Iron sheet roofing was torn off the houses of several 'Persons with Specific Needs' (PSNs) – bureaucratically identified vulnerable community members. Gaping holes punctured thatched roofs across Tika. Material repair revolved around relational adaptations and the reprioritisation of household expenses to enable DIY efforts. Storm damage laid bare the full scope of institutional neglect. Ultimately, having the opportunity to return enabled me to observe the effects of the steady decline in aid funding for settlements. The deterioration of the South Sudanese economy and associated currency fluctuations directly impacted people's ability to pay rent in Arua City and to survive in the settlement. It also

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[45] Casual conversation on this divergence suggested several possible causes. Firstly, the enigmatic and well-networked Mayor of Koboko, Sanya Wilson, was instrumental in mobilising funds from the EU. Secondly, Koboko is situated at the border and has a high concentration of Kakwa-speaking people of Ugandan, South Sudanese, and Congolese citizenship. This makes integration a much more straightforward prospect than in the intensely diverse context of Arua. Early action on counting the self-settled refugee population also provided statistical evidence of the size of the refugee population (VNG International, 2018). It is nevertheless interesting to note that Arua, as the focal point for refugee management in the 1980s and 1990s, benefitted from investments in its built infrastructure – for example, roads and office buildings.
[46] Though I decided not to reflect on these experiences in my research, they enriched my understanding of the intimate reach of bureaucratic and geopolitical politics in everyday family life for South Sudanese households.

impinged on the viability of return to South Sudan. The elongation of the research timeline, while oriented around my competing familial obligations, enabled me to better witness the ways social, material, and embodied distress unfurls over time.

Figure 5 – Damaged housing in Tika after a storm. Source: Brown, 2023.

Access

This sub-section addresses the intentions and impacts of gatekeepers, as well as the role that nodes of accessibility play in enabling and facilitating research. Initial institutional approvals included LSE Ethics, Gulu University Research Ethics Committee, and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST).[47] These approvals took a top-down directionality. Several people with senior institutional positions eased this process greatly by generously facilitating introductions. Beyond these research bodies, I obtained permissions from UNHCR,[48] OPM Kampala, the Regional Desk Officer for Arua, the OPM camp commandant in Rhino settlement, the Arua City Clerk, the Arua District Chairman and the Resident District Commissioner. My ability to access these stamps of approval, and in turn, how I was perceived throughout my research journey, was fundamentally shaped by being a white woman and by speaking English with a British accent. For example, when introducing myself and my work, the City Clerk of Arua City gladly engaged me in a lengthy conversation about his own personal connection with British educational institutions.

Each of these institutions variously claimed a stake in the protection of research participants. This is a crucial issue for ethical research practice, as well as the development and quality of the data collected. Particularly when the very institutions and individuals representing those institutions are part of the problem. Addressing the deeply embedded legacy of institutional hostility toward refugees, Brankamp and Daley note that the role of the camp commandant, the government representative responsible for overseeing all activities within refugee camps and settlements, 'was explicitly established for … spatial management and control' (2020, p. 120). Within Uganda's settlement infrastructure, the same camp commandant position holds the responsibility for refugee safety and protection. This issue raises questions about whether 'refugees' constitute a defined group in need of protection, and if so, who is responsible for that role?

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[47] Ethical clearance number SS1167ES.
[48] Interestingly, other researchers have since been told that UNHCR Uganda has since taken a step back from providing letters of introduction for researchers within Uganda (personal communications).

Managing gatekeepers when conducting research with people in displacement often has less to do with ethical protections for refugees themselves than it does with the 'culture of secrecy' ascribed to UN institutions and the governmental departments therein (Autesserre, 2014, p. 275). However, the 'culture of secrecy' was not something I consistently grappled with. Institutional secrecy emerged through interviewees' evasion of questions, rather than outright refusal. In contrast to other researchers' experiences with OPM (Torre 2023, pp. 90-91), the RDO for West Nile was consistently open to my research. Similarly, I faced no problems with OPM staff limiting what I could observe. To some extent, I believe this reflects the fact that most considered my topic to be outside their institutional scope, which likely afforded a degree of protection for them from questions of institutional accountability. Additionally, the mobile nature of my study likely meant that if I was a source of concern, I was rarely around long enough to draw much attention.

Regarding international institutions, while staff from UNHCR Uganda were relatively receptive to engaging with the research and my findings, I repeatedly faced difficulties accessing interviews and clarification from WFP Uganda staff. WFP Uganda has increasingly developed a reputation for closely guarding its data and programming details, much to the frustration of aid workers and researchers working across Uganda. Several Kampala-based staff of humanitarian organisations believed this to reflect the donor pressures facing WFP (I-142, 154, 155), which were linked to the fallout from the corruption scandals uncovered in 2018 (Okiror, 2018).[49] International institutions seemed perceptibly more nervous about engaging in critical discussions over the course of my time in Uganda – perhaps linked to the gradual closure of the civil rights space in the national political arena, including the closure of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (CIVICUS, 2023). An additional factor, however, was undoubtedly staffing cutbacks across UN agencies and (I)NGOs. Staff at all levels of the refugee response were increasingly responsible for several full-time roles. As corroborated by senior staff, with the withdrawal of aid funding, there was simply less time to engage with research (I-180).

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[49] Informal conversations with other scholars located the institutional closure in the criticism WFP Uganda has faced publicly and concerns that the sources for those publications may have been internal.

Outside the offices of international and national institutions, the relationships I established were pivotal. My personal trustworthiness was considered an extension of the company I kept, as much as it was any reflection on the way I conducted myself. While any flaws in the data and its presentation are my own, the depth of engagement from interlocutors with this work is greatly indebted to the research collaborators who dedicated their time, energy, and goodwill, cultivated over years of intentional relationships. For instance, my initial and crucial introduction to religious leaders in Arua City came through a colleague in Gulu who had assisted a driver whose vehicle had broken down in a rural area. Her generosity at that moment uniquely established a connection with a South Sudanese religious leader in Gulu, who subsequently introduced me to his counterpart in Arua. Evaluations of my moral character were determined by these relationships – several interviewees mentioned they agreed based on their trust in my co-researchers. Over time, my commitment to consistently returning to the space set me apart somewhat from aid workers.

My material engagements were also an important way of communicating my positionality. My mode of mobility became an essential aspect of situating myself in the space. I was observable. Who I travelled with and how I travelled mattered. I travelled with humanitarian staff on only two occasions while tracing their activities. For all my other journeys between the camp and the town, I travelled as a passenger in public taxis and on motorbikes. These journeys facilitated moments of connection with other passengers whom I often encountered again. This made me highly visible both to staff passing by in four-by-fours and to residents of the settlement, eliciting shared acknowledgement of uncomfortable journeys and granting me a degree of flexibility (rather than having to adhere to organisational curfews). Although several aid agencies generously offered me time in their offices and regular desk space, I was cautious about accepting these offers, not wanting to be affiliated with any particular organisation. Travelling by motorbike (rather than car), sleeping in an 'ordinary' house and in the homes of friends in the settlement, the food I ate, and who I ate with were all crucial markers of how I was perceived and positioned – several refugees and government staff noted happily, 'you stay with people'. It is striking and, in some ways, disheartening that people received these practices of connection so warmly rather than considering them a minimum standard for engagement.

Labels as objects of analysis

The use of bureaucratic labels as a structuring criterion for academic research has been a source of vociferous debate in refugee and migration studies. Critical scholars have warned about the risks of replicating the labelling systems developed by bureaucrats, embedding institutional arrangements that implicate academia in generating both epistemic and material harm (Daley, 2021; de Genova, 2002; Zetter, 1991; Bakewell, 2008b). Using the refugee label, defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention, as a research tool raises significant ethical concerns as it is closely intertwined with state-making practices (Rosenthal, 2015, 2023; Malkki, 1995). Categories of citizenship and non-citizenship contribute to what Malkki refers to as the 'national order of things' (1995) and perpetuate epistemic coloniality (Rodríguez, 2018). Crawley and Skleparis (2017) draw on what Apostolova (2015) calls 'categorical fetishism' whereby reliance on the dominant categories enables a politics of bounding which 'fails to capture adequately the complex relationship between political, social and economic drivers of migration or their shifting significance for individuals over time and space' (Crawley and Skleparis, 2017, p. 48). Moreover, in complex border contexts, the clear separations of bureaucratic labels often come undone (Bakewell, 2000, pp. 106-107; Turton, 2003, p. 7).[50]

As blunt instruments of oversimplification, labels homogenise diverse populations. Nevertheless, as they also govern the structuring of material assistance and so hold power as a tool for accessing limited resources. As Scalettaris notes, the term 'refugee' does not define 'a relevant sociological group' (2007, p. 38); rather, the bureaucratic category reveals more about 'the system that produced the label' than the individuals it labels (*ibid.,* p. 41). Investigating systems of humanitarian governance, including the state's perspective, necessitates engaging with bureaucratic constructions and interactions with 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'. Accordingly, I

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[50] For an account of the conceptual debates that characterise the use of the term 'refugee' and/or 'forced migration' refer to Zetter (1991). In this chapter, building on his long-term engagement in these discussions, Zetter argues for using forced displacement to capture the full scope of diverse, dynamic, and ambiguous movements, including but not limited to asylum seekers and refugees. This also creates space to recognise those who are 'forcibly displaced' but nonetheless fall outside normative, established international legal frameworks. I recognise that this is a complex and contested terrain and that the use of the term 'refugee' in this thesis does not reflect a full elaboration of the concept. Following Turton's lead, I anchor my conceptualisations of these terms in 'empirical observation and sociological analysis' (2003, p. 2).

aim to understand the utilisation of these bureaucratic labels as part of the systems that '[establish, define, control and fix] the spaces of life of the categories that it simultaneously recognises and creates' (Agier, 2011, p. 68), and how individuals navigate those structures. The widespread usage of these terms - the settings in which they appear, who uses them, the intentions behind their use, and their actual effects - requires careful attention. It is also important to think about how people themselves claim power over the bureaucratic system through those labels. In north-western, to be a refugee is to assume a legal status through which South Sudanese people are de jure entitled to claim in Uganda as a bureaucratic legitimator and as an economic resource, even if those resources are not consistent or reliable. At times, South Sudanese people I spoke with sought to use the label to their advantage in different ways – asserting claims to protection through reference to international refugee rights and knowledge of the Ugandan constitution.

Conducting research in the mid-1980s, Malkki (1995) talks about the ways that those in town seek to assimilate to mask their identity as 'refugees' in towns in contrast to those in settlements who seek to mark out their refugee status to define themselves as different from Tanzanians. By contrast, in Arua, individuals who do not have documents would still claim the refugee label as their own. The city-wide report published by VNG International found only 45.8% of the households engaged said they had all the relevant documents, 27.73% said not all the household members had them, and 26.34% did not (2024, p. 57). Nevertheless, the vast majority of South Sudanese who were engaged in this research self-identified with the 'refugee' label. This is likely a reflection of the expansive networks that link South Sudanese people to the settlement system – unregistered individuals often live in the settlement alongside or as part of formally registered households, meanwhile registered refugees were often in town – creating ambiguity about the role of legitimated documentation. Moreover, in north-western Uganda the word 'refugee' is widely used as a tool to distinguish citizens and non-citizens and to distinguish between what were perceived to be the appropriate governance structures of particular places and people, rather than as an accurate reflection of a particular legal status.

Labelling systems also perpetuate colonial identity politics, which sought to demarcate boundaries and control the movement of bodies (Brankamp and Daley, 2020). Not least in relation to the politically charged ethnicised discourse of conflict in South Sudan, which is in

turn reified by humanitarian-bureaucratic structuring in Uganda. For example, through the assertion of 'ethnic' boundaries during digital identification processes for refugees (Jacobsen, 2017). These seek to neatly delineate identities for bureaucratic management in denial of the contingency of identity markers. In this context, it is crucial to maintain furtive attention to the persistent inequalities within labelled groups, how these feature in everyday lived ways and how they work with and through contemporary racialised hierarchies. The tensions between bureaucratic labels as created outside, formally administered, and yet lived and negotiated, are also related to complex identity claims. Throughout my research, interlocutors deployed and weaponised various identity markers to dismiss claims and assert differences. These discursive acts taken in isolation have the effect of downplaying internal tensions and friendships across categories and the malleability of these dynamics. On this basis, Daley (2021) calls for a more nuanced and fluid notion of identities, emphasising the interconnections across space and place. Across West Nile, people display dynamic reflexivity around identity claims to navigate overlapping and sometimes contradictory social worlds. For my part, I seek to situate the deployment of identity terms in context, critically examining their effects.

Ethics in practice

This statement of positionality and submission of my epistemological framing is a claim to intersubjectivity rather than objectivity. In this section, I engage questions of positionality and ethics with a view to the everyday ethical problems that arise during research, or what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call 'ethics in practice'.

The wider issue of praxis is particularly difficult when researching suffering in contexts of displacement. From the outset, it is important to state that reflexivity and its associated product – statements of positionality – often serve as a tool to legitimise and redeem the white researcher in an ongoing assertion of power over research subjects. Reflecting on this, Gani and Khan (2024) insist that researchers must eschew performance and centre humility. Indeed, it is dubious to rely on the ethical practice (and humanitarian claim) of 'do no harm' when the research process is itself often enrolled in the labour of harm. As Tuhiwai Smith argues, 'research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realised' (2012, p. 8). In many ways, I embody this power imbalance. As a white researcher

attached to a university in the former colonial metropole, my presence in a remote part of the continent reifies historical antecedents. Ultimately, this thesis is a product of the status quo, whereby African and Indigenous voices continue to be systematically silenced (Pailey, 2019).

The work of dismantling and challenging these hierarchies is ongoing, and inequalities persist whereby who speaks, what stories are heard and who they are heard by is narrowly defined. Throughout, I have adopted a foundational commitment to thinking critically about who I reference, who I think with, what stories I tell and from where I think. It is as much a methodological as a theoretical standpoint, which requires researching from different starting points, being intensively reflexive and open to the possibilities presented through the research process.

An important ethical concern related to displacement studies is the issue of suffering – how to talk about it and what to do about it. Concerning the question of how to talk about it, critical race and Indigenous theorist Eve Tuck challenges this orientation by asking whether attempts to document pain, disenfranchisement, and dispossession inflict further damage, however unintentionally, by presenting Indigenous communities as one-dimensional spaces of abandonment. In a call to communities, educators and researchers, Tuck squarely focuses on the 'long-term impact of "damage-centred" research' and insists that researchers should not frame communities as 'only damaged' (2009, p. 422). Others have critiqued the tendency to assert that suffering is something to be witnessed (Finnström, 2008). Though many articulated their participation in the research as an opportunity for witnessing, particularly against what they saw as deliberate silencing at the hands of the Ugandan government, Tuck asserts that this is a potentially flawed 'strategy for correcting oppression' (2009, p. 414) that risks pathologizing the very people and spaces that the research seeks to intervene in. At the same time, this is a constitutive part of a critique applicable to the whole 'research problematic', whereby researchers potentially end up 'reproducing victimizing notions of refugees and therewith contributing to concepts of vulnerabilities which the international refugee regime uses' (Krause, 2017, p. 19).

Relatedly, there is the question of whether and what one does when faced with contexts of suffering. In an insightful engagement with young persons involved in research in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, Bilotta (2018) stresses the importance participants put on the actions

taken to alleviate suffering. Some influential scholars have similarly made the moral case that research engaging with suffering must necessarily seek to alleviate that suffering (Turton, 1996, p. 96). Frustration with the limited tangible impact of research is a major contributor to 'research fatigue' (for an in-depth discussion, see Omata, 2020). However, as Jacobsen and Landau (2003) describe, scholars must also comply with (and thrive within) the academy. These goals are not always compatible – sometimes researchers risk compromising their data in the rush to act (*ibid.*). In an everyday sense, these tensions played out in the baseline requirements of the research ethics for this research - in contrast to LSE ethics, which focused on not unduly influencing people to participate in the research, UNCST focused on ensuring that participants receive sufficient compensation for their time. Ultimately, these tensions over reimbursing participants reveal the incongruous approaches of the multiple ethics that researchers are expected to adhere to simultaneously by different institutional bodies and participants.[51] The question of how to balance these concerns requires careful consideration throughout the research process.

Often, I found these critiques, while legitimate, did not resonate with how people experience and narrate their experiences of life in Uganda. While an agential orientation does more to recognise the empirical realities of how people live and create in constrained circumstances, there is a risk that researchers unintentionally erase suffering. Where aid agencies publicly disseminate documents that insists on utopian self-reliance discourses and one-dimensional success stories, bringing these testimonies of how people experience and navigate these violent structures of power to the fore is unfortunately necessary. Reading through people's articulations of their experiences, there is often an intense awareness of political violence, repression, and blurred boundaries between what should be and what is. In articulating how they cope with incredibly difficult circumstances, many interlocuters centred their self-identified lack of choice - in response to some of my questions, asked, 'What can I do?' Participants often hoped to mobilise me as a vehicle for their stories, particularly in cases of violence and institutionally inflicted suffering. While they often acknowledged my limited power as an individual student, their

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[51] For my work, I was required to provide a standard reimbursement of 5,000 UGX to each participant. I do not believe these are enough to make a difference in people's lives to incentivise participation, nor did this seem to be the reason people made these decisions. At times, I went beyond this through financial contributions and my emotional engagement – a reflection of the necessary relational posture of moral personhood in this space.

evident hope was to carry forward the stories as a potential medium for change. In doing so, interlocutors laid bare the knowledge of their own invisibility to the outside. Taking their requests to be seen and heard seriously, I seek to render their intimate knowledge of power visible.

Many of my interlocutors spoke about humanitarian and development policy and projects in much the same ways that critical scholars have. They too noted cases where aid is mobilised as an instrumental tool that silences and naturalises their poverty (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990). At the same time, several of them made it clear that they had and could also experience interventions in positive ways – whether through new relational networks forged in the midst of peacebuilding activities or the learning of new skills, even if those skills could not be translated into sustainable income-generating opportunities (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020). Working with the perception many interlocutors had of me as 'a potential witness' thereby enacting 'an opportunity to restore them to politics and history' (Neto, 2019, p. 133, referencing Ranger, 1994), requires engaging with the complexity of their accounts. Though the testimonies shared overwhelmingly recounted stories of immense poverty and difficulty, leaving room for nuance is a thesis-long requirement. In writing about suffering, I intentionally attend to the mundane, the joy, generosity, and practices of care that also resounded throughout the data collection. In doing so, I have also sought to write against the racialised production of affect, whereby particular emotions are reserved for particular geographies or bodies. This is important both in terms of wider academic debates and in the local context where South Sudanese people are dismissively stereotyped and chastised for expressing anger or frustration, even in cases of manifest injustice (see Chapters 4 and 8).

Tracing diverse forms of relational help can be an important way for researchers to reposition the power and significance attached to different types of help in displacement. Several scholars have argued for better accounts of how refugee-refugee care is a major form of humanitarianism, indicating agency and the way care work actually happens in the face of overwhelming institutional distortion (Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016b). In practice, this means paying close attention to the numerous ways that support comes from other displaced persons and other sources outside formally recognised humanitarian infrastructures, which at times include humanitarian workers themselves.

I ensured that all participants were aware of informed consent and informed them that they were entitled to withdraw from the interview at any time. On two occasions, individual interviewees later asked me to withdraw a response they had provided to one of the questions, which I did. While I consistently informed potential interlocutors about the intents, aims, and likely outcomes of my research and their rights in that regard, repeatedly reminding people of their option to withdraw is insufficient for engaging with the realities of long-term research. The boundaries of ongoing consent are often unclear. To mitigate these effects for people who were most frequently interacting with and were potentially most susceptible to the blurred line of friend and researcher, I made a habit of actively taking notes in their presence and engaged them in active conversation around the direction of the research. The co-construction of the data and analysis was, therefore, an empirical and methodological concern (Finnström, 2001).

Ultimately, though I have done my best to anonymise the work, it may be possible for those intimately familiar with the context to trace whose stories I share in this work. In my case, I often conducted interviews in the open, and occasionally, the interviewee invited others to join; others would sometimes seek to sit and listen. In her doctoral thesis, based in the northern regions of South Sudan, Naomi Pendle reflects on privacy as 'indicative of suspicious and inappropriate behaviour' (2017, p. 51). Georgina Pearson also noted in her research along the riverine areas of West Nile that insistence on privacy and confidentiality could have unintended consequences (2015, pp. 65-66). Even in government offices, sometimes, potential interviewees would insist that their colleague accompany them. I understood this as a self-protective measure – bringing a witness to the conversation. But as a researcher, I found this quite disconcerting – how could I possibly assure participants of anonymity?

While I have anonymised as much as possible without over-extending the abstraction, the reality is that researchers must contend with and reckon with the potential vulnerabilities produced by participation. Consent documents seek to assert the guarantee of anonymity, perhaps in deference to bureaucratic comfort rather than in a reflection of reality. When recounting these stories of violence, it is important to take seriously the notion of a lifetime debt –a debt that researchers potentially owe to their participants who often remain in these spaces (Muzvidziwa, 2005). When it comes to unearthing sites of injustice and disquiet in migrant precarity, colleagues who have conducted work in other refugee settlements in Uganda have cautioned about the risk

of 'institutional retaliation' facing sources (Torre, 2023, p. 105). Similarly, several interlocutors told me of times they were threatened for speaking out. For example, a man living in Tika, RCS recounted that an OPM staff member came to his home, suggesting that he should 'be more careful' after he raised concerns over the lack of primary school facilities in the presence of an expat organisational staff member who had come to the settlement for monitoring purposes (I-135). Nonetheless, as mentioned above, the stories I have included are those which participants shared freely.

Ethical relations in the research space, particularly for those I interfaced with more regularly, meant providing encouragement and support, offering a listening ear, enquiring about the well-being of individuals and families, and allowing myself to reciprocally be open to advice as a situated, embodied process of interpersonal exchange. To 'do no harm' also meant managing my presence mainly where I was more evidently 'out of place'. My position within capitalist and racialised hierarchies of power was most evident in the settlement. The sheer fact of my day-to-day mobility and access to resources was an inescapable material embodiment of the power dynamics that infiltrated my research, amplified in different ways by the dynamics of displacement and poverty (Omata, 2020). That I could travel on a regular basis without needing to ask for help, my own 'self-reliance' was a striking privilege that enabled me to assume a default position of distance from these relationships. Nonetheless, through my willingness to stay in the settlement, to eat and socialise with people beyond the confines of the base camp meant, as critical political ecologist Farhana Sultana notes (though from a very different context and position), participants seemed to view me 'generally as an acceptable outsider doing "useful" research' (2007, p. 379).

A final important part of my ethical practice has been engaging in dialogue over my findings and thoughts on various topics as they have developed. While this was an ongoing practice, in December 2024, while I was in Uganda on a separate project, I was fortunate to have an opportunity to present my work in both Arua City Council Hall and at Muni University. These were valuable opportunities to reflect on and disseminate my preliminary findings. I have also contributed to policy spaces where possible. Though I, as the writer, have final control over the outputs of this work, I have critically engaged others in the production of the work, while also attending to the spaces of change and provocation to which I can contribute. In particular, the

findings of Chapter 8 in particular contributed to a widely-read key considerations policy brief (Brown and Torre, 2024), and I have supported the publication of a collaborative, creative output reflecting on the impacts of prioritisation and differentiated assistance in Kenya (Kidi *et al.*, 2025).

Limitations

Lacking proficiency in the relevant local languages, I could not attune to the rich vocabularies and verbal expressions of experience shared by many of my interlocutors. While my attempts to greet people in different languages elicited warmth and amusement, generously received as a meaningful gesture, this linguistic limitation inevitably restricted my access to certain conversations and modes of expression. It also shaped the scope of my data. Early in the fieldwork, when conducting a more structured style of interview, I sometimes sensed that research colleagues might have been inserting their own interpretations or providing only partial summaries of what participants said. A stronger grasp of the various languages in use would have enhanced my ability to navigate these dynamics.

There were times when I felt younger women were reluctant to provide detailed answers to questions, perhaps a response to my positionality. As others working in similar settings have found, being a highly educated white woman affords you an ambiguous gendered social positioning, giving you access to highly gendered spaces of discursive exchange (Pendle, 2017). However, this ambiguous position can also create uncertainty. In such cases, though the women concerned did not overtly refuse, I proceeded with caution, and, on two occasions, I ended the interviews early. Nevertheless, my socially relatable and humbling role as a mother partially mitigated this relational distancing. The playful, public defiance of my then two-year-old was a frequent source of amusement to onlookers. On several occasions, women expressed their perception of a shared foundation of experience. For example, an older woman in RCS in the early stage of the interview said, 'you are a woman, so you understand' (I-146).

The limited accessibility and readability of the local archives hindered my attempts to situate the documented history of the governance of the urban space. Much of the archival material I was able to access in the District and City offices was rotting and disorganised, rendering my attempts to draw out the traces of historical governance somewhat futile. Termites had inflicted

extensive damage on many of the files. Extensive conversations with archival experts in this space revealed their personal distress at the state of the archives. Numerous attempts to engage the city's record-keeping office revealed that archival work had taken a backseat in prioritising their tasks. Officials from the municipality and the city allegedly misplaced a substantial portion of the documents exchanged between the two entities. In response to tensions surrounding the distribution of assets between the reconfigured governmental bodies, District officers deliberately withheld other documents. Over 4,400 land files were handed over to the City Council in 2024, four years after Arua City was operationalised. Failing to make progress with the archives, I took a different approach and asked the Regional Desk Officer if there were any accessible archival records for OPM West Nile. He laughed in response and said his life would be much easier if he had been wise enough to upload everything to floppy disks long ago. The lack of a traceable archive also affected his work – at the time, he was trying, and failing, to locate the original copy of a land distribution agreement for a pending court case.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the epistemological and methodological contours of my thesis. Initially guided by a concern with the bureaucratic processes of 'refugee inclusion' within the city infrastructure, I spatially and relationally reshaped the research in dialogue with the realities of movement among South Sudanese refugees. While narrow bureaucratic spatial imaginaries surrounding these non-citizen populations constrained official responses to and knowledge about these movements, a multi-sited, mobile approach was essential for uncovering the financial and relational dynamics that informed how South Sudanese people interfaced with the city and settlement structures. This thesis, therefore, reflects a reorientation explicitly towards the spatially expansive experiences of South Sudanese people– one which I came to embody through my methods.

Chapter 3: Historicising International Displacement in Uganda

This chapter provides historical background for Uganda's refugee policies and contemporary response infrastructure with regard to the differential inclusion of refugees and accumulation of resources associated with the displacement economy in Arua.

Introduction

This chapter provides a historical grounding for Uganda's refugee policies, situating these policies within the long shadow of colonial administrative structures to establish an empirical and analytical foundation for understanding the contemporary space for inclusion and exclusion in Arua as both historically informed and socially contingent. The first section of this chapter accounts for the history of Uganda's responses to international displacement, with specific attention to documented cases of self-settlement. As well as acknowledging significant historical continuity in Uganda's posture towards refugees, it examines the shifting social and political considerations that informed the proclamation of new and adapted approaches to refugee support. It highlights racialised practices of differential refugee inclusion. The second section draws out the specific treatment of urban refugees as a formally recognised status early in the twenty-first century. The third section provides a close reading of migratory and colonial histories of West Nile up to 1979. In doing so, I argue that the immense adaptability of identity structures creates a complex tapestry for contemporary experiences of displacement in Arua. The fourth section focuses on the post-Amin displacement of West Nilers and the fifth section outlines the impact of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement on Arua town and contemporary displacement relations. Across these three sections, I stress the uneven accumulation of resources across different class and identity groups to relate this wider history to the emergence of Arua City and its contemporary relationship with displacement.

Formalising Refuge

Uganda has a long history of providing refuge and protection for those fleeing across international borders. In the 1940s, thousands of Polish migrants sheltered in southern Uganda (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1994; Lingelbach, 2020; Gingyera-Pinycwa, 1998, p. 5). Notably, the

settlement structure for the Polish population bore many similarities to later iterations of settlements. However, while the Polish settlements were granted expansive services and significant latitude for self-governance, later iterations catering to African refugees have encountered limited-service provision and restricted scope for the self-administration of settlement services. The colonial office's evident desire to keep Polish populations separate from their Ugandan neighbours reflected the highly racialised roots of these divergent approaches (Tshimba, 2022).

In 1955, the colonial government introduced the Care of Sudanese Ordinance to respond to the Sudanese influx across the northern border following the outbreak of civil war in the newly independent Sudanese state.[52] The Ordinance was an important, though limited, step in providing a legal framework for the recognition of Sudanese refugees. Mirroring the language of the British colonial state, the policy was primarily and explicitly concerned with the 'control' of alien refugees. The Ordinance later served as the baseline for the 1960 Control of Alien Refugees Act. To the southwest, Uganda's oldest and first formal refugee settlement (Nakivale) opened in the southwestern region of the country in the late 1950s to respond to movement from Rwanda (officially gazetted in 1960). Consistent with earlier iterations, the settlement provided plots of arable land to registered households. By the time of independence in 1962, approximately 100,000 refugees lived in Uganda, coming from then Belgian Congo, Rwanda, and Sudan. At the time, organised settlements for Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda remained small, and many continued to find shelter by relying on relatives and friendships in border areas to sustain themselves, amplifying cross-border relationships.

In the early 1960s, UNHCR activities began to expand rapidly across Africa. First, to Algeria, where UNHCR focused not only on the period of displacement but also on repatriation and reconstruction. Then, more widely across the continent, with a good office approach that moved away from individual screening of refugees towards prima facie eligibility for assistance (Loescher, 2001, pp 107-108). At the time, because both the budget and capacity for delivering these interventions were extremely limited, formal interventions by the Office of the High

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[52] Sudan gained independence from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium on 1st January 1956, however conflict broke out in southern Sudan a year earlier, in anticipation of independence.

Commissioner concentrated on assisting governments with the development and implementation of rural settlement programmes and the provision of emergency material assistance to prevent starvation, not legal protection (*ibid.*, p. 119). The concern of Felix Schnyder, the high commissioner at the time, was to provide a standard of living 'comparable to – but not markedly better than – that of the surrounding local population' (Loescher, 2001, p. 122). Concerning rural settlements, Jacques Cuénod, the UNHCR Regional Representative for Africa, said it 'usually takes two years to implement' such a programme and that such programmes would constitute the bulk of UNHCR's activities (1966, p. 48).

In Uganda, in 1964, the Care of Refugees Act (CARA) replaced the Control of Alien Refugees Act. Although under CARA, there was no substantive allowance for freedom of movement, self-settlement continued and was widely documented. In the 1960s, officials indicated their awareness of refugees who preferred to settle among pre-existing citizen communities and those who lived in towns (Cuénod, 1966, p. 48). As early as 1968, UNHCR was openly praising the Ugandan government's approach to 'free-livers' who were finding opportunities for employment across the country (Betts, 2021, p. 11). For example, many Congolese who came to Uganda in the 1960s were self-settled, residing beyond the boundaries of formal settlement structures (ICARA II 188 in Pirouet, 1988, p. 240). Many of whom found employment as wage labourers, for example, in the sugar factories at Lugazi and Kakira (Jørgensen, 1981, p. 305; Kindersley, 2022, p. 108).

In 1969, UNHCR opened a branch office in the country. At that time, Uganda was receiving around half of UNHCR's US$5 million Africa programme budget, as well as development assistance. This financial and political endorsement of Milton Obote's government formed part of a strategic move to balance domestic political dynamics. The uneven weighting of Uganda's internal political divisions was counterbalanced by leaders who courted support by distributing jobs and resources to the marginal areas designated as refugee-hosting areas as part of a federal patronage structure. Reflecting on this precedent, Betts (2021) provides an incisive commentary on the political motivations of Idi Amin's turn towards UNHCR, international treaties and refugee hosting, which was intricately linked to aid resources and political legitimacy, rather than a specific concern with refugee welfare. Under President Idi Amin, in 1976, the government of Uganda ratified the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967

protocol. This was also closely related to the delicate political balancing of divergent regions within Uganda as Amin 'came to rely increasingly upon Sudanese and Rwandan soldiers' to buffer his support base (*ibid.,* p. 15).

Internal and regional allegiances shifted repeatedly in the immediate decades post-independence, with successive changes of governments in Uganda. As a result, the autonomy of different nationalities of refugees varied drastically over time (Long, 2012, for discussion of Rwandan refugee hosting). For example, while self-settlement was an established and accepted practice, in 1982, the second Obote government forcibly removed Rwandans from their homes in towns and cities and incorporated them into settlements. As Betts stresses (2021, pp. 19-21), this was not a progressive step but an assertion of population control against Rwandan refugees, whom the Ugandan government identified as a political threat. Correspondingly, settlements became a useful tool for mobilising significant international funding.

After coming to power in 1986, President Yoweri Museveni emphasised a particular vision of stability of rule, reconstruction, and regional solidarity. Aligned with his attachment to Pan-African solidarity, Museveni built on the prior government's openness to hosting refugee populations. In 1987, Uganda became a signatory to the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. While the President courted international favour through strategic image management, domestically, Museveni's government upheld the Care of Refugees Act, which afforded refugees only limited rights to movement. In accordance with both CARA (Chapter 64) and UNHCR's 1997 Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas, refugees were to be based in settlements and faced legal limits to their movements.

However, it is important to remember that these limits were not consistently enforced. As Kaiser notes, in the late twentieth century, officials were not particularly concerned with maintaining the more stringent details of CARA as it pertained to Sudanese persons (2000, p. 40).[53] While that was, by and large, the case, this flexibility was not consistent. Citing pressures on urban infrastructure, between May and June 1993, UNHCR transferred 15,000 refugees from Koboko

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[53] For a detailed account of the legal complexities and contradictions around the rights and entitlements afforded to refugees in Uganda prior to the 2000s, see Verdirame and Harrell-Bond (2005, pp. 28-31).

and the northern border to settlements in Rhino camp (Merkx, 2000, p. 19). The self-directed movement of refugees back to Koboko in 1997 highlights the government's inconsistent interest in enforcing controls over refugee movement. While considering return to Sudan, many refugees opted to base themselves in Koboko on account of the better educational opportunities and perceptions of increased security. As this example suggests, in practice, the government pursued a highly selective approach to refugee management.

While Museveni pursued widespread decentralisation, the government drew responsibilities for managing refugee affairs closer to the Presidency. In 1998, responsibility for refugees within the government was transferred from the Ministry of Local Government to the newly created Ministry of Disasters and Emergency Preparedness, which was situated within the Office of the Prime Minister. This significant move of centralised control indicates the strategic importance of the refugee response to domestic and international politics (Kaiser, 2000).

Over time, the government of Uganda promoted a developmental refugee response infrastructure. Previously, the government hosted refugees in agricultural settlements, which granted refugees a degree of freedom but provided services separately from the national population. As Merkx (2000, p. 19) notes, 'local settlement can be seen as the mere transfer of refugees from camps to agricultural settlements which can easily lead, as it did in the 90s in north-western Uganda, to "refugee islands" whereby services are provided in a parallel scheme without considering the hosts'. To counter this problem, in 1999, the government launched the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) in collaboration with UNHCR. The strategy sought to integrate refugees into national development planning and reduce dependency on aid. Sizeable refugee populations in Uganda had been present for over two decades (such as Rwandans in the southwest), and so there was increasing pressure from donors to reduce the costs of ongoing care and maintenance activities. The SRS sought to develop both settlements *and* their surrounding areas to improve the standard of living across both with a view to enabling populations to support themselves. It was not unprecedented in Uganda to include both refugees and host populations in humanitarian programming. Betts, drawing on the UNHCR archives in Geneva, shows that a major funding request from Obote in 1981 - 43% of a $2.3 million spend was for refugees, the rest for neighbouring communities in the southwest (2021, p. 20). The SRS

and the 2003 Development Assistance for Refugees Strategy, which followed, promoted the standardisation of the shared developmental approach for refugees and host communities.[54]

In West Nile in the late 1990s and early 2000s, UNHCR and the Government of Uganda found that the SRS contributed to increased food scarcity, increased school dropouts, and limited signs of income-generating activities (2004). Despite longstanding evidence of the limits of subsistence agriculture, the Self-Reliance Strategy was premised on the idea that sustainable livelihoods can be achieved solely based on small landholdings. In 2002, the Joint Food Assessment Mission found that 'only 38% of the arable land in Imvepi/Rhino Camp was put to use in the second season' (*ibid.*, p. 14). Instead of this being attributable to refugee dependency, as Kibreab observed in Somalia, the major determining factor for whether refugee households engaged in farming 'was the nature of the physical environment' (1993, p. 342). Yet, these policies fail to account for the quality of the land and, therefore, the viability of subsistence agriculture.

The SRS was designed to work within the confines of the existing refugee-hosting framework. It included reducing food aid as well as transferring management of health and community services to District governments where the settlements were located. Sarah Meyer's study documents that in Imvepi[55] the SRS 'entailed reductions in food ration, to between 40 to 60% of a full food ration for [the] "old caseload" - the 7,290 refugees who had arrived between 1996 and 2002' (2006, p. 35). Drawing on interviews and data gathered from the implementing partner in Imvepi – the German Development Agency – Meyer documents the unanimous consensus that under government district management, the quality and accessibility of service deteriorated. While the integration of service provision under SRS sought to address earlier critiques (Chambers, 1979; Harrell-Bond, 1986), it did so with insufficient support to district facilities. More problematically, the failure to address the underlying structural and political restrictions facing refugees, such as limited land access, the quality of land, and the inclusion of genuine representation in service provision and delivery, undermined refugee welfare.

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[54] The Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR) concept was part of UNHCR's wider efforts to advocate for increased assistance for refugees (UN, 2003).
[55] Also known as Mvepi.

Problematically, policymakers presume self-reliance to proceed on a developmentally linear basis, neglecting the socio-economic limits of refugee settlements and the risks posed by external shocks (UNHCR and the Government of Uganda, 2004, p. 10). Rather than prioritising developmental outcomes for refugees, the government located the settlements in politically strategic locations with high transport costs, transaction costs, and information costs (Werker, 2007, p. 474). In the 1960s, Cuénod wrote that in Burundi and in certain parts of Uganda where refugee settlements were based, 'the land available was of poor quality and barely sufficient to enable the refugees to settle' (1966, p. 4). Despite the ambitions of these frameworks, they failed to address the underlying challenges facing settlements in the north-west. In Uganda, as elsewhere, UNHCR has limited capacity to influence the location of camps (Herz, 2007). 'More than nine out of every ten refugees live in the most underdeveloped areas' of the country (UNHCR, 2023a, p. 24). Despite the overt disadvantages for refugee populations, placing settlements in remote regions provides a direct way to bring services to and strengthen state presence in otherwise underserved regions of the country (Betts, 2021; UNHCR, 2005, p. iv).

While official scripts suggest that Uganda's humanitarian infrastructure is exceptional,[56] UNHCR made the same argument about refugee 'settlements' in South Sudan and Zaire in the 1980s. The integrated rural settlement approach was seen as the best way to reduce UNHCR's financial burden in protracted displacement contexts. As such, the prominence of the Ugandan government in refugee-hosting leadership was as much the deterioration of attitudes towards and prospects for rural self-settlement in neighbouring countries (such as Tanzania in the 1990s, see Boeyink, 2020, pp. 85-96), as the progressive promotion of self-reliance in Uganda.

The 2006 Refugee Act replaced earlier laws and brought national legislation into closer alignment with international and regional standards, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1969 OAU Convention, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As noted in the introduction, one of the Act's most significant contributions lies in its rights-based approach. The 2010 Refugee Regulations operationalised the Act by offering implementation guidance concerning, for example, procedures for refugee status determination and practical mechanisms

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[56] See for example United Nations, 2017. See also a 2016 article on the BBC with the headline, 'Uganda: 'One of the best places to be a refugee''.

for managing land allocation, documentation, and access to services. Nonetheless, these instruments are also flawed. They maintained the temporary status of refugee populations – refugees are not entitled to naturalisation, nor are the children born to refugees within Uganda. They also limited the demand for equal treatment of educational access for refugees to primary education. One of the most celebrated aspects of the contemporary refugee architecture in Uganda is the freedom of movement afforded to refugees under the 2006 Refugee Act (Government of Uganda, 2006, 30.1). However, even this is subject to 'reasonable restrictions', 'or directions issued by the Commissioner', relating to issues of 'national security, public order, public health, public morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others' (Government of Uganda, 2006, 30.2).[57] The 2010 Refugee Regulations point 47 stipulates the administrative terms of that freedom:

> '(1) A person who is registered as seeking refugee status or as a refugee shall, on changing his or her place of residence within Uganda, give notice in Form I specified in the Third Schedule to the Commissioner of his or her new residence and address, within seven days after the change.
>
> (2) Every refugee who intends to relocate from one refugee settlement to another shall prior to the relocation, seek permission from the Commissioner.'

These qualified rights point to the fact that Uganda's model infrastructure still represents a limited form of integration.[58] Subsequent updates to refugee policy frameworks have included the 2017 Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHOPE) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). Each of these has, broadly speaking, upheld these principles by promoting increased integration of refugee populations into national state planning

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[57] A recent example of the deployment of 'reasonable restrictions' might include the COVID-19 pandemic containment measures applied to refugee settlements much longer than other spaces in Uganda. Mylan (2025) provides a detailed engagement with the contradictory logic of these policies of protection and containment in Palabek Refugee Settlement, Uganda.

[58] While recognising that Uganda's settlements reflect an endorsement of a relatively liberal policy framing, differing markedly from the more directly hostile environments found elsewhere globally, many South Sudanese referred to the settlements as 'camps'. Aid staff, well-versed in the conceptual scripts of Uganda's humanitarian infrastructure, lent on the 'settlement' framing.

and service delivery (IRRI, 2018b). They have also retained the focus on settlements as the legitimised place for refugees to receive humanitarian support.

Under this framework, the OPM oversees the management of refugee matters within Uganda. The OPM have a directive role vis-à-vis other ministries, and they work with UNHCR and WFP to jointly lead the refugee response in Uganda. The OPM coordinates refugees in settlements through Regional Desk Offices (each headed by a Regional Desk Officer (RDO)). OPM staff members are intimately involved in the policymaking, governance, and day-to-day management of refugees in the country. They are also responsible for providing physical protection to refugees. It is under the leadership of the OPM that refugees in Uganda are integrated into Uganda's public services. Through Section 48 (2) (n) of the Refugees Act and section 63 of the Refugee Regulations 2010, OPM also assumes responsibility for coordinating refugee matters with regard to the involvement of voluntary organisations.

Within Uganda's settlements, refugee representation is coordinated through Refugee Welfare Committees (RWC). The RWC structure reflects the structuring of the political leadership (Local Council architecture). The RWCIII operates as the settlement-level leader. RWCIIs represent individual zones in the settlement. RWCIs are the block (or village) level refugee representation. Also situated within this structure are various community representatives, for example, for young people, women, and health. Though RWCIII representatives are included in national planning processes via the Refugee Engagement Forum, they have limited say in resource management and continue to have limited space for engagement with participatory planning within their local governments.

Uganda's refugee regime, despite its relatively liberal credentials, masks highly uneven and often racialised treatment of different refugee populations. This can be observed across time and different facets of the refugee infrastructure. For example, drawing on Lwanga-Lunyiigo's (1994) analysis of 'self-sufficiency' concerning Polish refugees who resided in Uganda from 1941 to 1952, David Tshimba (2022) evidences the contrasting approaches to European and African refugees. Tshimba critiques Betts' (2021) conflation of self-sufficiency and self-reliance agendas, arguing that doing so obscures the racial agenda underpinning these divergent governance strategies. While the British colonial government understood self-sufficiency for Polish refugees

as something that required substantial, ongoing, external funding and resources, 'self-reliance' in Uganda places the responsibility for realising that ambition on refugees themselves. As Tshimba shows, not all displaced populations are chastised for failing to realise economic self-sufficiency. In more recent years, the government of Uganda has agreed to several bilateral requests to host refugee populations. For example, in 2021, 2000 refugees from Afghanistan as a temporary holding space while processing asylum applications to the US (Atuhaire, 2021; Athumani, 2021). Unlike the open-ended hosting of African refugees, refugees from Afghanistan were granted a more exceptional temporary status, framing them as independent of the wider refugee response. The government of Uganda's involvement with Israel's 'voluntary departure' scheme underscores the racialised management of refugee treatment. The policy which exclusively targeted African asylum seekers, involved the secret transfer of over 1,700 Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers from Israel to Uganda between 2015 and 2018 (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 28). The differential treatment of refugees by nationality under Uganda's refugee response infrastructure also shapes inclusion and access to urban refugee status, as examined in the following section.

In this sub-section, I have outlined the legal nuances and scope of the humanitarian infrastructure in Uganda. I have attended, albeit in a limited sense, to the practical and political decisions that have long informed the management of various refugee populations in Uganda. While the legal nuances and scope of the humanitarian infrastructure are immensely important, when discussing officially recognised and legitimated forms of intervention, we must not lose sight of the immense labour of care done by refugees, neighbours, friends, and familial networks.[59] Several of these contingent infrastructures of support will be the focus of Chapters 4, 5 and 7.

Urban refugee status

Although the material support available to settlement populations is subject to multiple shortcomings, unlike in the urban setting, humanitarian actors generally accept that material support is necessary for most settlement residents, particularly in the early years of displacement.

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[59] For further examples and discussions of these issues see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a, 2016b, 2019; Moro *et al.,* 2020.

By contrast, the legal definition of refugee determines that those residing outside of settlements are, in effect, relinquishing their claims to assistance. The spatial concentration of resources in settlements effectively redefined a refugee as an inhabitant of the spaces the government of Uganda recognises as places of refugee residence (Kaiser, 2006). Refugee legislation describes non-settlement refugees with a blanket presumption of self-reliance, a label which often has little to do with the lived circumstances in the urban terrain. Nationwide, therefore, the posture of the policy promotes a classed divide between rural and urban environments. The idea of a refugee with a corresponding set of entitlements is thus spatially triaged and enforces indirect limits on their mobility. As Bernstein and Okello stressed, 'by focusing assistance and protection on refugees who live in settlements, current refugee policy [in Uganda] undermines refugees' freedom of movement' (2007, p. 47).

In Kampala, in 2004, 'self-settled urban refugees were viewed as opportunistic, "irregular moves" who overburdened assistance programmes rather than as individuals in need of protection' (Sandvik, 2012, p. 116). As well as persistently seeing those in urban centres as less worthy than those residing in camps, governments, and UNHCR espoused concerns that urban recognition and support would incentivise further rural-urban relocation (Pavanello *et al.,* 2010; Refstie *et al.,* 2010). Regardless, there was widespread movement from settlements to nearby towns and cities despite the official stance that refugees were 'not permitted to move permanently out of the settlement in which they are registered' (Kaiser, 2006, p. 602). In practice, the major obstruction to movement was material and reflected personal decision-making by refugees who were often aware of the benefits and drawbacks of residing beyond the settlement (*ibid.*). Though many moved informally, to formally qualify for recognition in Kampala, in the absence of exceptional need (e.g. extraordinary medical reasons), OPM demanded that refugees provide proof of employment and residency as evidence of their self-sufficiency (Bernstein and Okello, 2007, p. 48). While the urban caseload remained small owing to these stringent requirements, (Lyytinen, 2015, p. 594; Sandvik, 2012, p. 112), extensive accounts documented the abuses asylum seekers and refugees faced in Uganda, stressing both refugees' immense protection needs and diverse motives for shifting to Kampala (see, for example, Parker, 2002).

By the late 2000s, there was growing pressure to grant urban refugee status to refugees. The fact of non-citizen populations in Kampala and advocacy for a large IDP population associated with

civil war in the north, estimated at between 300,000 and 600,000 people (Refugee Law Project, 2007), drew attention to the need for an urban humanitarian response. The humanitarian infrastructure in Uganda, much like elsewhere, was ill-equipped for urban environments' varied spatial and social configurations (Crisp *et al.,* 2012). It was only after a 'slow and even tortuous' process that UNHCR developed its 2009 global policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas (Crisp, 2017, p. 87). As this framework still relied on ideas of urban self-sufficiency, despite the recognition granted by the 'urban refugee' label, material support and legal support remained largely inaccessible.

Nonetheless, UNHCR's Ugandan Country Office's adoption of the 2009 UNHCR Urban Refugee Policy gave new legitimacy to sizeable populations of refugees who had informally relocated to Kampala. The urban caseload in Kampala began with around '210 individuals who had been relocated from the settlements owing to insecurity, particular vulnerabilities, or medical problems', excluding the tens of thousands who had 'self-settled' in Kampala (Sandvik, 2012, pp. 111-12; UNHCR, 2005). By 2011, the number of recognised refugees in Kampala had reached almost 40,000 (Lyytinen, 2015). Underpinning the policy approach to those residing in urban areas, often made explicit by the enforcers of the policy, is an assumption that those in the city are those with the resources to be there. As Kristin Sandvik found, colleagues at UNHCR were telling city residents that their refusal to remain in a settlement was evidence of their lack of protection needs (2012, p. 115).

Although the range of support available within Kampala has expanded since then, urban residence is still replete with tensions and contradictions. A recent example of the exclusionary measures still facing urban refugees in Kampala is that, under COVID-19, government agencies distributed food to poor and vulnerable urban residents, but only those with national identity cards. As a result, refugees in urban areas faced exclusion from this vital source of pandemic relief (Bukuluki *et al.,* 2020). A further example is that South Sudanese and, more recently, Sudanese populations are not allowed to register as 'urban refugees' in Kampala. Several South Sudanese friends and interlocutors had been directly involved in pursuing or facilitating registration within a settlement to acquire the formal documentation that OPM staff had denied them in Kampala. Meanwhile in December 2023, the Ugandan government announced that

Sudanese nationals would no longer be eligible to register for refugee status in Kampala (NRC, 2025, p. 1).

Arua's migration history to 1979

In the second half of this chapter, I examine the long histories of movement as they relate to the possibilities for inclusion and exclusion in West Nile, specifically focusing on Arua town. Prior to formal colonial rule, several Nilotic and Sudanic linguistic groups with shared origins and fluid boundaries populated the area now known as West Nile (Tucker, 1940; Middleton, 1962; Allen, 1993, pp. 50-59). As evidenced in the origin myths of the ethnic groupings defined today as indigenous to West Nile, these loosely defined groups comprised adaptable and flexible tapestries of segmented clans and sub-clans. At that time, the main exposure these groups had to external influence was via trading links with Khartoum and predatory Turco-Egyptian slave raiders. The area also drew interest for its lucrative ivory sources - the area was richly populated with large animals, including elephants and rhinos.

In 1885, the British incorporated West Nile into the Lado Enclave as part of the British Sphere of Influence.[60] In 1890, the British colonial office leased the enclave to the Independent Congo State during the reign of King Leopold II, as outlined in the Anglo-German Agreement of 1 July. The parties later amended the agreement to specify that the area would be handed over to the Sudanese government within six months of the King's occupational termination (Ali Taha, 1977, pp. 76-77). This decision partially reflected British colonial priorities of the time and their limited administrative capacities in the region. By and large, colonial powers considered West Nile to be a remote region of otherwise little economic value when compared with other parts of East Africa. As such, West Nile was temporarily subject to Belgian oversight under the Congo Free State. Under Belgian rule, the administrative base for the area was in Ofude, located in present-day Maracha.[61]

Under colonial government oversight, West Nile was situated at the geographical and administrative margins. Although this period is defined by minimal oversight, it inflicted

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[60] The Lado enclave covered a territory of land across present day Uganda, South Sudan, CAR, and DRC.
[61] Approximately 7km west of Omugo.

immense violence. Elephant and ivory poachers were given free reign by colonial administrators and often inflicted terror on local populations (McConnell, 1925, p. 439 cited in Storer, 2020, p. 88). The Belgian colonial project and its rudimentary state infrastructures focused on pillaging. In turn, West Nilers often responded with fierce resistance. This persisted until 1910, when, under the terms of the 1906 Anglo-Congolese Agreement, following the death of King Leopold II of Belgium, West Nile was incorporated as part of the Kajo Keji District of southern Sudan. The enclave formed the southern reaches of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. The curtailment of slave raiding was the major effect of British rule via the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium.

Given the weak administrative reach of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, even before the area was handed to the Condominium, British Parliamentarians raised concerns that, given British expansion into Uganda, the Colonial Office might be better placed to manage the area when compared with the Soudanese government (Parliament, House of Commons, 1908). Since the 1894 opening of the Ugandan Protectorate, it became increasingly relevant to secure inland territory owing to anxieties around German presence in East Africa, corporate pressure, and anti-slavery ambitions (Gjersø, 2015). With pressure on the government to facilitate administrative intervention to limit the spread of sleeping sickness and to enable the collection of hut taxes, in 1914, the area became the most north-western part of the Ugandan Protectorate. This was part of a wider exchange that also handed over the Equatorian region north of Nimule from the Colonial Office to the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium.[62] Splitting the Lado territory was a disjointed process which cut through ethnic groups, clans, families, and economic and social relations (Collins, 1962; Leonardi, 2020; Leonardi and Santschi, 2016, pp. 25-31). It was poorly planned, and the outline of what continues to form the international boundary east of the Albert Nile reflects the lines that were only intended to be provisional (McEwen, 1971, p. 260; Collins, 1962). These changes reflected the ongoing editing of these new political entities - the boundaries of the Ugandan protectorate continued to be re-drawn through to 1926.

Under Ugandan protectorate rule, parts of West Nile were subject to much closer administrative rule than they had been previously. The colonial government took extensive measures to manage

[62] The Congo border was partially delineated in 1894 and refined in 1915.

sleeping sickness, particularly on either side of the Uganda-Sudan border (Leonardi, 2020, pp. 226-227), and to produce 'colonial order' through administrative spatial and relational classification, with varying degrees of success (Leopold, 2009; Leonardi, 2020; Storer, 2020). Colonial governance structures imposed rigid boundaries over various loosely defined groups and cut through kinship relations of closely related groupings such as Kakwa, Madi, Kuku, and Lugbara (Stigand, 1934, p. 80; Middleton, 1960a; Leopold, 2009; Allen, 1994, 1996, 2019; Southall, 1953; see also Storer, 2020, pp. 90-92). As Storer notes, critically appraising the categories used in colonial ethnographies, 'in the precolonial period, and throughout the colonial period, any notion of a coherent Lugbara tribal group was a fiction' (2020, p. 84). In West Nile, the colonial administration drew and imprinted strictly delineated notions of tribal identity onto a diverse canvas of identities, languages, and customs forged through migration.

Colonial administrators were particularly concerned with rendering the region economically profitable. In West Nile, the limited returns produced by agricultural experimentation with crops such as cotton deterred investment in widespread cash crop production. The limited transportation infrastructure further deterred investment. Reports to the British Cabinet Office in the 1920s stress a preoccupation with promoting the accessibility of West Nile via railway, as a way to promote economic development across the north and, in particular, facilitate colonial interests in gold extraction in Belgian Congo via West Nile (Cabinet Memorandum, 1925, pp. 138-139). However, this proved prohibitively expensive (Cabinet Memorandum, 1962). Well into the 1960s, river transport was the only means of accessing West Nile. Until the 1960s, when construction finished on the Pakwach bridge, high transportation costs and the lack of adequate roads limited the scope of profitable economic activities (see Cabinet Memorandum 1925, pp. 5, 137-139).

From 1914 to 1962, the District was treated as a labour reserve whereby young men were recruited to join the military or take up plantation work in cotton-producing districts in the South (Leopold, 2009, p. 469; Leopold, 2005, p. 77).[63] As Bakewell wrote, 'From the earliest days of widespread European incursions into Africa, a major concern was to gain control over the

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[63] As Allen (1993) details, the treatment of riverine areas in West Nile, the colonial administration relied on containment measures to limit the spread of sleeping sickness, was quite different.

movement of people in order to direct it towards the aims of the invaders' (2008a, p. 1343). Labouring populations received wages that could be taxed and channelled towards market growth. The implementation of a Poll tax in 1918 compelled participation in the nascent cash economy either through securing employment within the administration, an option which was available to few and was replete with social stigma, or by travelling south to look for paid work in the plantation economy.

Mobilities in this region have long been overlaid by long histories of connection (Leonardi, 2020; Allen, 1996; Adefuye, 1985; Leopold, 2009) and these connections proved an invaluable resource for many who sought to avoid taxation altogether (Leopold, 2005, p. 109 references Collins, 1962a, p. 140). The relatively open borders crossing into Belgian Congo or north to Sudan provided an escape path. Meanwhile, others, originating from Belgian Congo, crossed into Uganda to access the opportunities presented by paid labour in the south of Uganda. Labour migration to the South also enabled the development of links with Kampala. Meanwhile, trade networks in fish and iron, which pre-dated colonial rule, cutting across Sudan and Belgian Congo, adapted to the imposition of the colonial borders and their different administrative authorities and capacities with vigour (Soghayroun, 1981, p. 1 cited in Meagher, 1990).

In the rural countryside, by and large, colonial interventions focused on sharpening land boundaries, establishing taxation and structuring communities under colonial administrative authority, but they did little to directly interfere with the clan structures that undergirded survival. The limited investments made in cash crop production were in rural areas. For example, tobacco production was based in Maracha and Terego (until conflict forced a shift in the 1980s). Throughout the colonial period, the Albert Nile continued to hold economic weight. Unlike inland locations, the waterway bolstered local trading prospects along the Eastern fringes of the sub-district. Rhino Camp village was one site of significant trade in the first half of the twentieth century. Cotton grew successfully in the area, and a cotton ginnery became an important source of local employment, drawing people to Madi-speaking areas along the Eastern fringes of West Nile. With substantial outmigration and limited investment, subsistence agriculture remained the dominant form of local economic activity.

A series of small colonial forts along the Albert Nile defined the Belgian colonial administrative structure; British colonial administrators relocated the sub-regional administrative headquarters further inland. This shift can be partially attributed to its strategic position near the border. It was also further away from the river, and on health grounds, this was preferable for colonial administrators. The names of both Arua and the neighbouring Aru in the DRC derive from the Lugbara word for prison – a location where clans detained 'slaves, captured youth, and the able-bodied' (Leopold, 2005, p. 31). During this initial period, Arua municipality remained small, but over time, the opportunities associated with being proximate to the administrative centre of the region increased, both through exposure to the administrative officers, missionary activities, and cross-border trade. Beyond the activities of missionaries, barracks and colonial offices, urbanising areas in West Nile received little investment. As the former deputy national archivist who was born in a village in Ayivu narrated: 'The movement to Arua town began largely in the early twentieth century. The missions and administration were based here' (I-134). The colonial state encouraged Christian missionaries to provide educational and health services. These churches and schools quickly became an important draw for people from other parts of West Nile. This both helped the colonial government to minimise its expenses and provided it with a convenient counterweight to Islamic influence (Allen, 1993, pp. 115-118, 132-138).

A class of elite civil servants began to emerge. Initially, these civil servants were members of Nubi communities, and latterly, mission-educated elites. The Nubi are not understood as a distinct ethnic group – rather a conglomeration of persons with diverse linguistic and geographic origins. Rather, they trace their heritage to the Sudanese slave soldiers of Khartoum trading companies and the Turco-Egyptian army. The Nubian identity was particularly flexible and steadily incorporated people who were willing to convert to Islam (Hansen, 1991). With a distinctly mobile and military heritage, many were employed in the colonial army, including the King's African Rifles, a multi-battalion regiment of the British colonial army. Owing to their military service record, they were known to be loyal to the Protectorate, and so those stationed in West Nile were often deployed to govern Lugbara-speaking communities (Leopold, 2005; Middleton, 1962).

Yet, at the same time, anxieties around the influence and mobility of Islamic trade networks continued to proliferate among colonial administrators. For example, as Allen notes, sleeping

sickness controls, which sought to isolate the riverine populations, were used as an opportunity to remove the Nubi influence from Madi areas (Allen, 1993, pp. 115-118, 125-126, 132-138). As Meagher describes, beginning in the 1920s, colonial administrators only allowed Christian missionaries to operate Western schooling facilities until independence. Meanwhile, Muslim children were disallowed from joining unless they agreed to convert to Christianity. In reflection of the British colonial government's contradictory engagement with Muslim populations, the British colonial government sought at once to limit Muslim exposure to educational services and commerce, but also ruled through Nubian military forces.[64] This exemplifies how colonial governance sought to manage religious expression in West Nile through a lens of both political expediency and cultural hegemony. Colonial administrators also attempted to minimise Muslim commercial activities, but far from preventing Muslim involvement in commercial trade, colonial limits on Islamic education opportunities reinforced their reliance on commercial activity and accelerated the growth of unlicensed cross-border networks.

The well-documented flexibility of the Nubian identity offers useful insight into the ways that identity claims are deployed across Arua town (Middleton, 1962, p. 571; Leopold, 2006). In the Oli area, the legacy of these Muslim populations extends to the naming of specific places. For example, Jacinto Cell in Oli is named after the Nubian man who settled there. Muru cell is named after people who migrated from Sudan (Pangisha, Oli) (Actogether, 2010, p. 24). Similarly, Odrokodroa is known as a place that was settled in the 1890s by Sudanese who were displaced by civil wars (*ibid.,* p. 43). Many settled in Arua Town – building on their shared Islamic background and proficiency in Arabic to establish themselves in Arua's regional trade networks (Mahajubu, 2021). In part, these evolving and adaptable notions of identity reflect their changeable nature as the inventions of colonial governance (as noted in Chapter 2). The urban arena became particularly associated with cosmopolitanism owing to these complex and coexisting migrations.

Additionally, in the 1950s, with tens of thousands of refugees crossing from Sudan fleeing the Anyanya I war (1955-1972), many took up residence in the town and took advantage of hazy

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[64] In conjunction with the pre-established trading links to Sudan; this propelled an association with commerce and a perceived aversion to schooling among Muslim communities that persists to this day (I-134).

bureaucratic boundaries in the borderscape. As Mawa explained: 'If you look at the population of Arua, it is mixed. Congolese and Sudanese became citizens. By then, the process of becoming a citizen was not really complex. In fact, the greater part of Kakwa, Madi and Lugbara are not in Uganda. It was easy for them to be accepted by the communities because they were speaking the same language' (I-134). Since Arua was gazetted, the municipality has functioned as a multi-linguistic melting pot where the boundaries of identity could be strategically managed as a resource for survival in town.

Despite the diverse cultural composition of Arua Municipality, colonial social engineering contributed significantly to the enduring tensions between different groupings in the region. The Ayivu, a sub-group of the Lugbara, historically lived in the areas surrounding Arua town and regard it as part of their ancestral land. However, both during the colonial and post-colonial periods, they have been systematically excluded from occupying the municipality itself (2008, pp. 125–136). In contrast, the Aringa, often associated with a distinct Nubi identity, claimed urban land and opportunities with relative ease owing to their role in trade networks and military service. British colonial policy deepened these divisions by relocating Nubi populations from the riverine regions into urban centres in the 1920s and 1930s (Allen, 1993, p. 124), while simultaneously imposing livestock bans within the municipality. This disproportionately affected the Ayivu, who were more reliant on agriculture and animal husbandry, effectively confining them to rural areas. Such policies laid the groundwork for inter-communal tensions, which at times escalated into violence. Post-colonial politics further entrenched these dynamics: President Idi Amin, who hailed from Koboko and emphasised his Nubian heritage, appointed Major General Mustafa Adrisi, an Aringa, as his vice president. When Amin exiled the Ugandan Asian population in 1972, Aringa communities quickly occupied the businesses they left behind. As indicated in Chapter 2, these historical divisions continue to shape contemporary contests over power, land, and resources in Arua Municipality.

These tensions point to the ways that statist interventions, as much as the ingenuity of city residents, have shaped the development of Arua. For example, the segmentation of populations along ethnic and religious lines under colonial policy produced socio-economic inequalities that persist to this day. For example, the colonial administration gave Alur individuals who were loyal to the colonial administration unpopulated bushland in the south of the city (around Pajulu).

Though the plots have since been subdivided and sold off, there is a cosmopolitan feeling to the area that is associated with migration. Divergent religious affiliations also shaped these dynamics, as Mawa narrated, 'You see it in the social-spatial layout. The northern part of the town sees more Muslim influence, and around the main religious churches, people settled according to their denominations' (I-134).

Ugandan independence in 1962 coincided with an important shift towards Arua. A series of major floods in the 1960s in the riverine regions of West Nile inhibited the use of the ginnery and submerged the landing site and stores, drawing business further West. The opening of Pakwac bridge in the 1960s enabled closer linkages with the rest of the country. In 1969, the national census documented 10,837 people residing in Arua municipality (City Population, 2025). Slow but steady growth continued through the presidency of Idi Amin, though much of this was undone in the violence that ensued with Amin's downfall.

Migration after Amin

When Amin's regime collapsed in 1979, the 'liberation' forces of President Obote, allied with the Tanzanian Defence Forces, soon entered West Nile. Through violent reprisals, the forces terrorised civilians and brought wholesale devastation to West Nile (see Harrell-Bond, 1986, pp. 39-49 and Storer, 2020, pp. 103-105). The intensification of conflict between former rebels and Obote's forces in 1981 and the massacre at the Ombaci Catholic Mission propelled almost the entire population of West Nile to DRC and South Sudan (then Zaire and Sudan, respectively) (Crisp, 1986). Estimates suggest that by 1985, 280,000 had fled to Zaire, and 250,000 people had fled to Sudan.[65] An estimated 60,000 Sudanese people who had not returned to Sudan after the First Sudanese Civil War also returned home (Allen, 1996, pp. 223-24).

The coverage and scale of humanitarian responses in these places diverged dramatically. In Sudan, Ugandan populations were met with a major, albeit fallible, humanitarian response that

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[65] Harrell-Bond (1986, p. 32) says there were 300,000 Ugandans in Sudan by 1984. Crisp (1986, p. 165) points out that these figures were contested and that official estimates were believed to exclude those living outside formal settlements, thus substantially underestimating the scale of displacement. Allen also interrogates these figures and suggests they may have been overstated (1996).

was correspondingly well-documented (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Crisp, 1986). By contrast, in Zaire, Ugandan populations relied almost entirely on local networks (Storer, 2020; Titeca, 2012). Though there was a coordinated response initiated in 1979, the scale and coverage of the response were sparse relative to that of southern Sudan. In 1981, UNHCR relocated approximately 60,000 refugees away from the DRC-Uganda border area to organised rural settlements to enable crop production. By the end of 1981, those residing in settlement sites were around 75,000 (UNHCR, 1982).

UNHCR expenditure in the Haut-Zaire region, where many Ugandans were, reached over $9.7 million in 1981, yet many West Nilers experienced what they felt was a complete absence of UN agencies. As a faculty member of Muni University narrated, 'there was no food', the UN were 'deep in the DRC, not at the border … people were on their own' (I-152). Some stayed with distant kin; others found shelter by renting in towns and villages. Many established themselves in urban trade networks, and others survived on irregular labour on locally owned land, providing a cheap source of labour and making significant contributions to agricultural production. For many, the period of exile in Haut-Zaire brought a high degree of exposure to the cash economy in new ways, in part because people lived among relative 'strangers' (Titeca, 2012; see also MacGaffey, 1991; Meagher, 1990). While UNHCR focused on developing the settlement areas, communities from Maracha and Ayivu, living proximate to the DRC border, were, in effect, abandoned by international actors and survived primarily with recourse to cross-border activities, kin, and religious networks (Storer, 2024).

During this time, Ugandan refugees contributed significantly to extensive cross-border trade networks as they took on the role of 'migrant labourers, whose fluidity of movement across borders made them an ideal matrix for the development of parallel trade' (Meagher, 1990, p. 76). Proximity to the border with Zaire, in particular, enabled easier access to illicit trading sites and meant that people could return regularly to tend gardens or conduct business ventures in the town (Titeca, 2012). They used the border to establish new and reformed circulations of goods and currency (*ibid.*, p. 66). Meanwhile, trade activities continued to grow for those who were able to remain in Arua. While creating opportunities for enrichment, the networks operated in an exclusionary manner and created significant inequalities between those in and outside these patterns of trade. This trade also exacerbated inequalities between urban environs and those in

the countryside, where subsistence agriculture provided the main economic activity, and insecurity continued (Storer, 2020, p. 108).

In the mid-1980s, international interventions focused on repatriating Ugandans. Despite organised repatriation programming, many were reluctant to return due to ongoing fears of insecurity and awareness of the scale of devastation that intimately affected their abilities to live in West Nile. Ultimately, the return of Ugandans to West Nile 'had more to do with the quality of life in Sudan and Zaire than conditions in their homeland' (Crisp, 1986, p. 174), compounded by deliberate worsening of conditions in Congo and Sudan. Under the statute of non-refoulement (1951 UN Refugee Convention), which Sudan and Uganda signed in 1974 and 1976, respectively, states are forbidden from forcibly returning refugees to the country of original displacement. The withdrawal of aid assistance prompted many to leave settlements in Zaire – in September 1985, assistance was stopped in six settlements (UNHCR, 1985). From 1983, Congolese soldiers demanded that self-settled Ugandans either repatriate or move to Sudan (Harrell-Bond, 1986, p. 51). The Ugandan government and the SPLA chased Ugandans from southern Sudan. Though this was billed as a 'spontaneous and organised return' (UNHCR, 1988), it was a highly political 'involuntary' repatriation. The process of return from Zaire and Sudan was complex - individual and family-level movements often involved multiple, staggered, and piecemeal journeys in response to ongoing concerns about safety and security (Allen, 1996, p. 7). Official repatriation exercises continued to avoid parts of West Nile deemed unsafe, with people brought back to Arua via Zaire and then, upon being dropped in town, expected to make their way to their homesteads (Crisp, 1986, p. 171). UNHCR documents suggest that by 1987, operational involvement in returns had been completed (UNHCR, 1988).

At the point of return, life in West Nile sub-region was one of widespread hardship. Widespread malnutrition and impoverishment affected much of the rural landscape (Leopold, 2005, p. 50; Crisp, 1986; Allen, 1993, p. 278). Aid and relief continued to be restricted, and successive waves of conflict severely damaged the road infrastructure. The rampant destruction of infrastructure and resources by Obote's army during this period meant that by the late 1980s, the terrain had changed significantly in the northwest. Many had to start over. Mawa narrated, 'When Amin came to power, of course, I had many plans, but they could not be implemented. We were running all the time, up to '85... The little house I had built for my parents was destroyed. All

those useful years were wasted - all the good buildings within Arua [town and district]' (I-134). Ongoing insecurity associated with both government and rebel forces (Bogner and Neubert, 2013) further limited the prospects for trade with other parts of Uganda. Farming land was overgrown, and the few houses that remained standing were dilapidated. Those returning to Uganda were embedded in fraught processes or 're-establishing' and reforming community identities through 'the parameters of a moral world' (Allen, 1988, p. 51).

Increased insecurity in the southern regions of Sudan in the mid-1980s prompted Sudanese to flee alongside Ugandans. Though numbers are disputed, it is estimated by UNHCR that between 1986 and 1994, Sudanese refugees, 170,000 and 210,000, arrived in Uganda (Merkx, 2000). At that time, ongoing sources of insecurity and material hardship severely limited the prospects for informal hospitality with friends and relatives. This led to the concentrations of populations around urbanising areas such as Koboko, which experienced significant overcrowding (Payne, 1998b, pp. 9, 13-15).

The opening of refugee settlements in West Nile during the 1980s and 1990s marked a significant shift in the architecture of displacement in northwestern Uganda and had profound implications for the political, economic, social, and material landscape of Arua town and its surrounding regions. Prompted by widespread regional insecurity, including conflict in southern Sudan, and the increasing scale of refugee arrivals, the Ugandan government, in cooperation with international humanitarian actors, established a series of large-scale settlements across West Nile. Key examples include Ikafe, Imvepi, and Rhino Camp Settlement, with additional settlements opened in the districts of Moyo and Adjumani (Merkx, 2000, p. 18). This development aligned with a broader continental preference for encampment as a strategy for managing refugee populations (Rutinwa, 1999).

The creation of these settlements necessitated the acquisition of substantial tracts of land, which were then subdivided and allocated to individual refugee households for residence and cultivation. For instance, RCS, initially established in 1980 as a temporary transit camp, was expanded in the early 1990s to accommodate growing numbers of arrivals. By 1992, land was formally allocated to refugees for agricultural production, reflecting a shift toward self-reliance policies (Merkx, 2000, p. 19). However, the choice of remote and agriculturally marginal areas

posed significant challenges: poor soil quality, isolation, and insecurity limited livelihood opportunities, underscoring why such land had been unused by host communities. Despite these difficulties, refugee presence was increasingly seen as economically beneficial at the local level, particularly through their contributions to agricultural output, labour supply, and local tax revenue (*ibid.,* pp. 20–21). These dynamics not only transformed rural peripheries but also reoriented Arua town as a humanitarian hub, mediating the flow of resources, aid actors, and commerce between refugee settlements and the rest of the region.

As well as strengthening ties to cross-border markets, the development of a formal refugee response infrastructure in West Nile, centred on Arua as a logistical and administrative centre, hastened the growth of the economy and led to important infrastructure investments. For example, UNHCR was responsible for laying the first tarmac road in the town (Leopold, 2005, p. 39). With ongoing insecurity across the northern region, relief agencies offered the primary source of employment in Arua. Though the camps were initially managed and organised by settlement-based aid agencies, aid governance steadily withdrew to Arua town in response to ongoing security concerns. Where colonial residences once stood, aid agencies took their place (Leopold, 2001). While aid agencies withdrew from the settlements, refugees were subject to numerous attacks from 'rebel' movements, including the West Nile Bank Front and later by the Lord's Resistance Army, with well over 100 refugees killed (Merkx, 2000; Crisp, 1986; Payne, 1998b; Betts, 2021).

Although aid agencies and international institutions focused on rural areas, the indirect impact of their presence was substantial. As Büscher and Vlassenroot argue, pointing to Goma's urban development, international aid agencies' sustained presence can have major indirect effects on town development (2009). Turning to Gulu, Büscher *et al.* (2018) argue further that contemporary urban planning and state involvement therein reflect a continuation of the dynamics established under the internal displacement and aid interventions from the 1990s. Materially, politically, economically, and socially, Arua City bears witness to these observations. Such was the prominence of the displacement economy that Leopold reported being told in the 1990s that 'the district had only two cash crops: tobacco and refugees' (2005, p. 4). Relief items such as vegetable oil provided by WFP were regularly found in the markets of Arua and Koboko (*ibid.,* p. 10).

With cross-border trade thriving, in 1990, economic sociologist Meagher described Arua town's main market as both a 'local centre of exchange' and a 'major distributive centre' (1990, p. 67). As well as foodstuffs, tea stalls, and manufactured goods, there was a less visible trade in gold, US dollars, and coffee. Although Arua was a small town of only approximately 30,000 people in 1995 (CAP 1993 3.1 referenced in Leopold, 2005, p. 37), the traffic of goods and business between this tripartite economy took on outsized importance within the regional context, both across international borders and within West Nile. These investments were unevenly distributed, resulting in stark social stratification. Despite the presence of substantial aid money, describing the early 2000s, Mawa reflects that upon his retirement and relocation back to Arua town, 'there were still signs of war and broken buildings ... Also, the poverty level, compared to where I was, was rather high' (I-134). Nevertheless, attracted by the relative availability of services and trade opportunities, the population rapidly expanded beyond the central municipality. This growth was occurring, 'particularly towards the south and west; that is where the development was really going. People in the north did not want to buy land and develop it' (I-134).

Migration and trade, 2000-2013

The early 2000s were a period of significant change for Arua, shaped by the cessation of LRA activity in northern Uganda[66] and, crucially, the stabilisation that accompanied the signature of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Following the signature of the CPA by the government of Sudan and the then rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), the Sudan-Uganda border region became a key site of trade and 'opportunity' (Vlassenroot and Buscher, 2009, p. 3). This had important implications for residents of Arua, as the town became a key supplier of goods to South Sudan (Yoshino *et al.* 2012). Still recovering from displacements of the 1980s and 90s, the changed political landscape drew traders from Uganda, Congo, and other areas to Arua as large numbers of South Sudanese people came to purchase goods and make use of services in the town, bringing what local politicians in Arua called 'an explosion of business' (Schomerus and Titeca, 2012, p. 23).

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[66] Though not the focus of this section, the eventual cessation of hostilities between the LRA and the Government of Uganda in northern Uganda in 2006 ushered in a new period of stability for the residents of Arua who had been largely cut off from the rest of the country for significant periods of the conflict.

However, as in previous waves of displacement and political change, the opportunities presented by these new and amplified avenues of trade were unevenly distributed. While large-scale traders were able to make the most of new business opportunities, small-scale Ugandan traders experienced a fraught and intensely violent landscape as they were left vulnerable to the abuses of post-CPA South Sudan's militaristic state authority (Schomerus and Titeca, 2012).[67] This had a dual effect, amplifying both financial and social divisions between those with state-military connections and those without. As Titeca's interview in 2012 with a trader in Arua reflected, 'It [is] the big people who do business [who] are protected… They don't care about the small people's money' (2012, p. 18). While some residents of Arua shared an understanding of the socio-economic stratification occurring on both sides of the border, reflecting to Titeca that they felt populations on both sides of the border are the 'same people with the same interests' (*ibid.*, p. 10), these tensions could spill over with violent consequences for South Sudanese citizens living in Uganda. Flashpoints emerged around specific incidents of violence against Ugandans in southern Sudan, with South Sudanese citizens in West Nile, including hospital patients, sometimes becoming key targets for these volatile outpourings (*ibid.*, p. 19).

The uneven implications of these circulations were highly visible in Arua. With an estimated daytime population of 150,000 and severely outdated 2002 census count of 65,400, public service infrastructures were inadequate to cope with this level of business (*ibid.*, p. 23). Market prices similarly surged in response to demand, with widespread inflation for essential goods including food, clothes, and transportation, with knock-on effects for residents of the area. Persistent deficits in public service provision – spanning education, medical services, water, waste disposal, road infrastructures, and housing – were exacerbated by these trends. This compounded strain within class dynamics with low-income households facing rising prices, limited access to opportunities, propelling many outwards and away from town centres (*ibid.,* p. 25).

In the years following the CPA, continuing with South Sudan's early independence, residents of Arua also observed the steady arrival of military-associated families whose presence was

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[67] Cross-border activities of both militaries have been cause for concern. For discussion of this please see: Schomerus, 2012; Prunier, 2004.

sometimes marked by conspicuous displays of affluence, including large, expensive vehicles and purchases of sizeable plots of land. For many, these performative displays affirmed ideas about the uneven accumulation of wealth across the border, reinforcing uneasy tensions among Ugandans and their new neighbours, which fed into existing narratives of inequality and privilege within the region (see also Branch and Mampilly, 2005; Leonardi, 2011). This was the immediate context for the arrival of hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese people to West Nile following the outbreak of conflict in South Sudan in 2013.[68]

Conclusion

The migratory history of West Nile, particularly Arua Town, provides essential context for understanding the inclusion of 'self-settled' refugees. Despite clear structural constraints that limit opportunities for meaningful improvements in household conditions, including the lack of an effective and coordinated state infrastructure, refugees and migrants have historically had to rely on complex, contingent strategies of mutual support. Despite longer histories of exclusion and efforts to assert control, residents of Arua town have long forged their own rhythms and routines in active dialogue with life in the borderscape, at times, in conjunction with state actors, outside of official regulatory frameworks.[69] Wealthy Muslim elites have drawn on their own trade networks. Meanwhile, cross-border cartels built from these early trading patterns and kinship networks have drawn the town into extensive relationships and economies built on the movement of people and their multi-locality. The circulations and flows that permeate Arua produce a cosmopolitan space that has dynamically expanded through these expansive conduits of material and relational engagement. Despite, or perhaps because of, shallow, hierarchical, and extractive relationships with various state forces and significant periods of sub-regional insecurity, the town has continued to thrive in a manifest practice of inter-dependency.

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[68] These tensions are important to note as they inform social and economic relations in uneven ways. As Storer notes in her research with South Sudanese faith-based communities, while Ugandan 'residents were not overtly hostile, disputes could be occasion for inflammatory and stigmatising narratives to be directed towards South Sudanese' (2024, p. 7). As will be discussed further in Chapter 5, these dynamics also influenced attitudes towards South Sudanese residents of Arua and, in very practical ways, the pricing strategies South Sudanese people faced in local markets.

[69] See Kindersley, 2022 for a rich discussion of local theories of citizenship and belonging.

The structure of the displacement response following the exile period facilitated a changed relationship between West Nile and the national government. As noted earlier, increased humanitarian funding provided an opportunity to distribute resources to an area estranged from the central state and, in turn, to balance out a lack of domestic political support from the central Buganda region (Betts, 2021; Mutibwa, 1992; Leopold, 2005). The humanitarian aid infrastructure has also been an important vehicle for increasing state presence through the state-led provision of services for host communities and refugees in otherwise remotely located borderland territories. District government responsibility for various service provision levels and increased taxation revenues from markets serving refugee populations have emboldened state authority, leading to direct increases in local state coffers (Kaiser, 2006).

Chapter 4: Re-thinking Regional Mobility from the Settlement

The settlement is the bedrock of the formal infrastructure of refuge in Uganda. By attuning to the structural conditions of camp life, this chapter locates the uneven (im)mobilities of South Sudanese people to and from the settlement as precariously nested within the hostile humanitarian infrastructures and economies of refuge.

Introduction

This chapter traces the experiences of South Sudanese individuals living in Tika Zone of Rhino Camp Settlement, focusing on how everyday life unfolds within this space. It examines how bureaucratic structures actively shape and constrain life in the settlement, enabling various forms of violence against refugees. In doing so, the chapter challenges simplistic assumptions about those who choose to leave, revealing that such departures are not merely acts of opportunistic mobility but responses to systemic harm. The embodied and spoken accounts of violence, which motivated many of my interlocutors to move, forge complex connections between the camp and the city, blurring the boundaries between these two domains and challenging the uneven treatment of these spaces of refuge (Sanyal, 2012, p. 633).

The chapter opens with an account of extreme physical violence in the settlement and its aftermath. Building on this account, I highlight how these events continue to actively shape the forms of everyday harm experienced in the settlement. Humanitarian infrastructures often deliberately concealed these violences, stretching them across time and space in ways that made them less visible yet deeply felt. Against this backdrop, my South Sudanese interlocutors articulated their movements away from the settlement as an explicit rejection of life within it—a refusal shaped not only by material conditions but also by the cumulative weight of everyday harm. Refugees often challenge external assumptions about their economic independence after leaving the settlement, as many remain entangled in ongoing relationships of humanitarian dependence that continue long after their departure. The narrowly spatialised structuring of humanitarian resources compels the continuation of refugee' mobilities. From this perspective, the seemingly distinct spaces of town and settlement become intensely interconnected sites of survival.

Tika 1D

On 11 September 2020, stray cattle belonging to neighbouring Ugandan households entered the garden of a South Sudanese man, Angeth Machar.[70] Angeth was a 23-year-old registered refugee. His home was in Tika Zone, Block 1D. He lived alongside an estimated 285 South Sudanese households in the block.[71] Angeth had been cultivating crops on his plot, and this was the third time the cattle had damaged his crops. The last two times this happened, Angeth brought the case to local police but received no compensation. This time, Angeth took direct action - he caned the boy who had been tending the cattle.

When reports that the boy had been beaten reached Odraku, the Ugandan village situated next to Tika 1D, a relative of the boy claimed he had been killed. In response, the local council village chairman (LCI) and his brother, the local council parish chairman (LCII), who OPM had given responsibility for refugee security in the area, mobilised Ugandan villagers. Beginning at around 5 pm, they began to attack the South Sudanese residents of Tika 1D with bows and arrows. The attackers killed ten South Sudanese people, including Angeth, and injured nineteen others. Smoke rose from the area as the Ugandans set South Sudanese houses ablaze – razing fifteen refugee homes to the ground and damaging twenty-six others (Athumani, 2020; see Figure 6). When notified of the unfolding event, OPM staff and Ugandan police took four hours to reach the site. Even then, they insisted on needing backup before they could intervene.

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[70] In this instance, after consulting with residents and former residents of Tika, I have chosen to use the person's real name. The people I consulted identified widespread misreporting as a key problem following the incident. Without alternative pathways for justice, they argued that mentioning him by name was a way to restore what they experienced.

[71] Personal correspondence with UNHCR Arua.

Figure 6 - The charred remains of houses in Tika 1D. Source: UNHCR, 2020.

In response to the violence, the residents of Tika 1D and neighbouring blocks fled. The UNHCR estimates that more than 1,000 people from Tika 1D took shelter in Tika Primary School. In their fear and desperation, many travelled to Arua Town in hopes of greater security, while others resettled with relatives in nearby villages and settlements. Mayen, a South Sudanese man who fled at the time, reflected, 'We know we are vulnerable, so we ran… Within the week of the incident, many ran to Adjumani … where there were other Dinka' (I-135). Those who, like Mayen, fled to other settlements faced further violence. Government security forces, including OPM staff, insisted that they should return to Tika. When refugees refused these suggestions, instead of offering protection, government security forces beat them and subjected them to tear gas. On 8th October 2020, UNHCR vehicles were used to transport 183 people back to Tika from Adjumani.[72]

Those who had fled from Tika 1D were relocated to a nearby block (Tika 4). They were given wooden poles and carpets – the colloquial term for UNHCR emblazoned tarpaulins - to aid the

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[72] UNHCR sub-office Arua staff confirmed the number of returns but would not comment on the process of return beyond acknowledging that UNHCR vehicles were used.

construction of their houses. Those who had fled from other blocks, no matter how closely connected or proximately located to Tika 1D, were refused any support. One resident narrated, 'We thought they would give us what we need, but there is nothing' (I-151).

Though new arrivals continue, many who were around at the time have since left the settlement. As focus group participants from Tika 4 put it, those who remain are 'only those who don't have the capacity to go back' (F-2). Though the main orchestrators of the violence were eventually arrested,[73] South Sudanese interlocutors narrated that they continue to feel acutely vulnerable.

Situating direct physical violence

The events which unfolded on September 11th, 2020, marked an aberration in the narratives of hospitality which emphasise the relatively peaceable coexistence between 'refugees' and 'host communities' in Uganda (Nambuya *et al.*, 2018; Betts *et al.*, 2019, pp. 13, 30-31). The disproportionate violence witnessed in the surrounds of Odraku village, and the layers of state-sanctioned violence experienced in the wake of this event, exposed 'the cracks and the rigging' of the infrastructures of refuge – precisely because it drew attention to the people who are otherwise 'meant to be invisible' (Gordon, 2011, p. 2).

In their anthology, *Violence in War and Peace*, critical medical anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois assert that 'violence is a slippery concept - nonlinear, productive, destructive, and reproductive' (2004, p. 1). Critiquing the notion of violence as an 'act' or 'event' that exists in isolation from wider social processes, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois argue that 'violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality - force, assault, or the infliction of pain - alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim' (*ibid.,* p. 1). As they argue, multi-scalar registers of violence operate together, often in simultaneity. On a continuum, moments of 'extraordinary' or 'excessive' violence are juxtaposed with 'the routine, ordinary, and normative violence of everyday life' (2004, p. 5). Within a co-productive framework, the invisible, silent, or slow violence of

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[73] Despite the prospect of a trial being raised in July 2022 (O-4), the trial is yet to take place. It was widely suspected by South Sudanese interlocutors that the LC and his brother, the LCII, had been released. Many known perpetrators continue to live alongside the South Sudanese refugee populations of Tika.

peacetime must be understood within the same schema as the abject violence that is used to characterise war. To understand how direct violence is rendered acceptable to perpetrators, therefore, we must return to the everyday landscape. It is worth noting that the study of violence has a long lineage in the region - scholars have put forward divergent accounts of the complex social mechanisms that justify certain forms of accountability both within and between communities.[74] For the purposes of this thesis, however, I am more concerned with the linkages between structural violence, institutional neglect, hostility, and this moment of seemingly 'extraordinary' violence.

As is widely documented, poverty is a shared condition between many South Sudanese in the settlement, and their Ugandan neighbours – West Nile is among Uganda's least developed sub-regions; as of 2019/20, the poverty rate sits at 59%, relative to the national rate of 41.2% (UBOS, 2022, p. 25). Despite recent reductions in sub-regional poverty rates, much of the population continues to be highly vulnerable to poverty - 'every second person in this subregion was vulnerable, or in other words, had non-negligible chances to become poor any given year' (World Bank, 2022, p. 112). Recognising the conditions of the host community, the shared experience of poverty, and the 'burden' borne by local landowners in hosting substantial populations, 30% of humanitarian aid must directly benefit Ugandan citizens. As noted in Chapter 3, the emergence of this policy stemmed from the frustrations of parallel service provision by aid agencies in past displacements, which meant that refugees, for a time, had better access to services than neighbouring Ugandans (Merkx, 2000, p. 19). Moreover, as well as increased market activity in the areas in and around the settlement, employment opportunities tend to benefit Ugandan citizens.[75] This is, in part, a necessary feature of creating the conditions for refugee-host community integration, lessening the likelihood of host communities resenting

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[74] These are complex discussions which are beyond the reach of this chapter. See for example, Allen's article 'the violence of healing' (1997). Drawing on his time in Moyo District in the 1980s and 1990s, Allen examines the ways direct physical violence functions as a form of interpersonal accountability. See also Porter (2016) rich discussions of social harmony and its restoration after sexual violence. See also Harrell-Bond (1986, pp. 324-329) on the potential role of nutritional deprivation in prompting violence. de Waal challenged this idea arguing that it oversimplifies the interplay between political, social, and economic factors that contribute to violence during famines (1988). In doing so he demands a broader approach to violence which accounts for the political agency and structural conditions.

[75] The complex impacts of refugee-hosting on Ugandan communities are explored in d'Errico *et al.* (2024).

refugee populations, and forming a core part of the benefits bestowed in return for the government's occupation of communally owned land.

Nonetheless, Ugandans from host communities often feel excluded from services which they feel favour refugees. Local landowners petition OPM claiming that the government has not sufficiently invested in infrastructure in the area, despite the continued presence of refugees on their communal land. Local Ugandan residents of the settlement area informed me that they are pursuing a legal case against the government on this basis.[76] In the neighbouring settlement – Imvepi – youth rioted over the course of several days to express their disquiet over what they felt was the uneven distribution of employment opportunities in the settlement (Draku, 2017). The steady withdrawal of international programmes and funding from settlements has amplified these tensions. Communities of Ugandans who relocated to the area or have established claims over the land, too, have expectations of what they might gain from the settlement infrastructure.[77]

It is at the interface of neglect, frustration, and unfulfilled promises in this periphery that tension erupted. The disproportionately violent response of 2020 was the culmination of mutual frustrations that had been building for some time. Pressures on essential resources were (and continue to be) high – disagreements would regularly break out at water points and over vegetable gardens. In September 2020, six months into the nationwide lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions were mounting. Essential household items became increasingly unaffordable, and the lockdown prompted many organisational staff to withdraw from regular presence in the settlement. Politically charged discourses over the perceived attributes of ethnicised populations further inflamed tensions.

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[76] The case is listed under Andati Faruk & 182 others vs attorney general. See the 'Land registry causelist for the sittings of: 07-7-2025 to 11-07-2025' as published by the Judiciary of Uganda, 2025.

[77] The scale of these unmet expectations was made clear to me when I requested information from the RDO in Arua's regional office in March 2023. As noted in chapter 3, he responded with shared frustration. He explained that the lack of archival records (water-damaged and termite-ridden) presented problems for him as landowners were attempting to take the government to court for the government's apparent failure to meet their expectations as agreed upon land allocation.

This case also provides a window into the role of state actors and bureaucracies in enabling and enacting violence of diverse forms. Although OPM, the Ugandan police, and even LCs held responsibility for the 'protection' of refugees, they were each directly implicated in physical and social violence. There are two facets of this that I want to draw attention to. Firstly, although direct violence is less often noted in relation to humanitarian bureaucracies, this case demonstrates the brute force wielded by the same bodies that claim legitimacy as humanitarian actors. While governing bureaucracies are often understood as enacting a sanitised form of reform and discipline, a very real and ongoing threat of direct physical violence that undergirds bureaucratic power (Graeber, 2006, pp. 105-106). Here, anthropologist David Graeber underscores the co-production of multiple forms of violence by arguing that it is often the threat of direct violence that underpins the social orders of bureaucratic encounters in everyday life. In this instance, those who fled the settlement, seeking safety in Adjumani, were first advised, and then brutally forced to return to Tika. As Hanno Brankamp observes, building on his study of policing in Kakuma, 'underneath the thin veneer of humanitarian civility, the mobilisation of physical force is always an ultimate possibility' (2019, p. 190). This echoes earlier observations of state governance concerning internally displaced populations in northern Uganda – as Adam Branch argues the camps 'were only able to exist because of […] the violence of the Ugandan state in forcing people into them, preventing people from leaving, and repressing political organisation' (2009, p. 478).

While UNHCR staff were not directly implicated in the process of forced return, the use of UNHCR vehicles in the process was noted by several who were transported back. Similarly, the lack of corrective action after these experiences of violence is taken by refugees to be highly revealing of UNHCR's lack of ability or interest in guaranteeing protection. In that sense, UNHCR is taken to be complicit in sanctioning this state-sponsored violence.[78] While UNHCR denied direct involvement with the forcible return of refugees to the settlement, for refugees on the receiving end of this violence, there are extremely blurred lines between the roles of international institutions, state actors, and operating partners.

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[78] See also Chapter 8, 'Producing power'.

The second aspect concerns the abandonment and inaction which unfolded following the forcible return of South Sudanese residents of Tika and inflicted a more hidden but equally desperate form of material and bodily harm. The limits of compassion for those who were affected by the violence were made clear - only those who had fled directly from Tika 1D were given material support to rebuild their homes. The challenges of repair were informed not only by the looming threat of more direct violence, but also ongoing limitations to vital sustaining flows of resources. The destruction of material structures that households had carefully cultivated over multiple years was an enormous challenge. Young men from the settlement were called upon to identify the bodies in the morgue, photos of those bodies circulated via WhatsApp, drawn up years later as evidence of the violence. Reconciliation was limited – although the LC and his brother were arrested, the trial never came to fruition.

A single memorial demarcated the graves of eight bodies (see Figure 7).[79] Life in the settlement continued as it had before – nothing was done to address the material hardships that underpinned community tensions. The hierarchies of power that condition everyday life were reinforced through the forcible relocation of refugees and the lack of justice, which continues to plague those affected. Tika 1D remains empty – the shells of homes remain as a visible reminder of what once was. Through these material traces, the echoes of this event continued to reverberate years later. The humanitarian infrastructure's deliberate (in)action constitutes a form of control that operates alongside the direct oppression inflicted through forcible return. When there is an awareness of the effects of a given structure, and there are people in positions to change, as Tyner and Rice put it, the distinction between '"killing" (as a form of direct violence) and "letting die" (structural violence)[80] begins to collapse' (2016, p. 3). The knowing 'production of vulnerability constitutes a violent act' (*ibid.,* p. 4). State inaction can be read as a form of

[79] The relatives of two who were murdered were able to mobilise enough resources to transport the bodies back to South Sudan.

[80] Galtung's structural violence emerged from Peace Studies in the 1960s. Johan Galtung proposed the term to account for the violences that emerge in the absence of an obvious violent actor, or as Gupta puts it 'crime without a criminal (2012, p. 21). It is an avoidable deprivation of which 'shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances' (Galtung, 1969, pp. 170-171).

control which keeps marginalised populations in a state of 'permanent injury' (Mbembe, 2003, p. 21; Davies *et al.,* 2017, p. 1268). The deprivation of opportunities or freedoms, underpinned by the specific social order of refuge, is 'institutionalised within wider structures and therefore normalized' (*ibid.,* p. 1269). Though the 'incident', as it was often referred to by former residents of Tika, was over, the recursive systems of power which enabled and sanctioned the violence persisted.

Figure 7 – Tika 4: Memorial for those who were killed on September 11th, 2020 (Brown, 2022).

My engagement with the notion of haunting began in July 2022 when one of my colleagues invited me to attend what was supposed to be the trial relating to this incident. Though the trial never came to pass, over the weeks that followed, I began to trace the deeply held experience of social injustice surrounding these events. Given the broader context of Uganda's justice system –

marked by chronic delays, case backlog, and frequent non-prosecution – it is not surprising that no trial ever took place for the refugees killed in RCS in 2020. According to the Judiciary's own reports, the backlog remains substantial, with over 42,588 cases officially noted as backlogged (Judiciary of Uganda, 2023, p. 4). However, these delays, combined with the lack of reparative intervention have deeply eroded trust among refugees, host communities and humanitarian staff. The failure to pursue justice after these killings was interpreted not as a symptom of bureaucratic failure, but a political choice, a stark signal of ongoing abandonment. Current residents of Tika 4 insisted on showing me the memorial (O-11). Wary of unintentionally causing disrespect, I kept my phone in my bag until a resident asked to borrow my phone before proceeding to take pictures, even clambering onto the memorial to digitally record the inscription (see Figure 7). This intentional act of documentation, the seemingly perpetual postponement of the trial, and everyday forms of scarcity in the settlement were themselves haunting evidence of social injustice. While the indefinite postponement of the trial may be a reflection of the Ugandan justice system writ large, people I spoke with felt it was a reflection of abandonment within Uganda's systems and ultimately a failure of humanitarian protection.

Months later, I asked to see the area that used to be Tika 1D. The grassy area is unoccupied except for the hollowed-out remains of PSN houses. While no one mentioned ghosts or spiritual attacks, Thiik explained that people, even nationals, do not go there now for fear of what it might provoke. This ambiguous suspension was not about spiritual vulnerability, but about the fear of reprisals. It is entirely possible to have a coexistence of these forms of haunting, but spirits did not emerge as a theme of this research. Perhaps this reflects p'Bitek's point, 'The dead … are mostly forgotten, except those that are believed to be troublesome' (1971, p. 428). During my research, my interlocutors were more preoccupied with the troublesome present: legal justice, their dispossessed futures and the oppressions and silencing of the present. Accordingly, informed by the critical policy thinking of Tess Lea (2020, 2024), this thesis attunes to haunting, lingering effects of policy failings for South Sudanese people as that which registers 'the costs,

the forfeits, and the losses of modern systems of abusive power in their immediacy and worldly significance' (Gordon, 2008, p. xvii).[81]

The settlement

Stepping back from this case, the following section traces the multiple registers of social and economic hostility that characterise South Sudanese accounts of everyday life in the settlement. It traces how haunting, as an affective and material experience of social injustice, is embedded in the administrative architecture of refuge.

Arrival

South Sudanese people undergo lengthy processes to register as refugees in Uganda. When South Sudanese people arrive at Uganda's borders, they have often completed arduous journeys. Their paths to reach a registration point can vary dramatically.[82] Though some were able to travel securely using vehicles, many trekked long distances on foot. At the border, most pass through one of many formal of Uganda's entry points. Others reported entering via undocumented routes, particularly when there was insecurity along the main access routes.

Having reached Uganda, South Sudanese people can claim prima facie refugee status, meaning they can claim refugee status without undergoing an individual determination process.[83] If they arrive via one of Uganda's main border points, Persons of Concern are brought to a transit centre close to the northern border.[84] During their time at the transit centre, new arrivals register their details with OPM. While they await transfer to a reception centre, they receive meals and

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[81] Gordon emphasises the need to engage more deeply with the everyday manifestations of haunting to recognise the 'barely visible structuring forces of everyday life' (Gordon, 2008, p. 151), the hidden forces that 'both compel and inhibit social action' (Radway in Gordon, 2008, p. viii). An engagement with policy hauntology therefore invites a critical examination of marginalised voices, forgotten histories, and unseen (or deliberately ignored) structures of power, with a view to establishing that there is 'something-to-be-done' (ibid.) about these injustices.

[82] There are others who will arrive first to relatives and friends within Uganda. When they do eventually register, they must still pass through this process. Under COVID-19 procedures they were also required to quarantine within the collection centre. For those with children in school at the point of registration, this can be a complicated process. Being aware that it could take many weeks to pass through the centre, this often led to families deferring registration until the long school holiday from late November up to early February.

[83] See NRC (2018) for a full summary of the registration process.

[84] Persons of Concern is the bureaucratic label used to cover both asylum seekers and refugees.

other basic 'Core Relief' items including UNHCR-inscribed blankets, sleeping mats and jerry cans. Children also receive immunisations against polio and measles. Though people are only meant to stay in the transit centre for one to two days, delays and heavy influxes can cause intense congestion, at times exceeding 200% capacity (UNHCR, 2023d).[85] At the time of my in-person data collection, though the pace of new arrivals had slowed, registrations continued.

Upon leaving a transit centre, new arrivals registering within Rhino settlement are brought to Ocea reception centre. For those adhering to formal registration procedures, this is their first point of encounter with the settlement. This process homogenises diverse populations and positions them under one logic of aid beneficiary. Within reception centres, staff screen all would-be refugees to collect their biometric data, family composition, and overall health status. Each household undergoes a review to address security concerns and a short interview to confirm their identity and nationality. Whilst they wait for the process to finish, residents of the centres sleep in communal temporary shelters and receive hot meals. Again, despite official commitments limiting the time in the centre to a few days, these bureaucratic procedures can take several weeks.

Persons with specific needs (PSNs) are those UNHCR identifies as facing specific protection risks, including single parents and unaccompanied minors. In collaboration with partners, UNHCR offers additional services to PSNs. However, efforts to account for individual needs as recognised by fixed categories of exceptionality are limited - increasingly so, as budgets and programmes are repeatedly scaled back. For example, emergency shelter kits are no longer universally distributed to all PSNs (UNHCR, 2023b, p. 4). Suited more to the needs of the power structures that allocate these categories, they flatten and erase differences, masking inequalities and, often, producing further inequalities. As Zetter observed, 'labelling simultaneously defines a client group and prescribes an assumed set of needs … together with appropriate distributional apparatus' (1991, p. 44). It is unsurprising, then, that these categories and the processes of support that are associated with them can also have unintended consequences. Social

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[85] Kuluba was also the site of COVID-19 quarantine procedures which were in place from March 2020 to March 2023. During COVID-19 restrictions, all new arrivals were to remain in the transit centre for fourteen days before being transferred.

expectations of sharing can lead recipients of additional support to redistribute substantial portions of the additional help they receive. In other cases, RWCIs, who are often mediators of aid distribution within their blocks, divert sources of support to their friends and relatives.[86] Since organisations often rely on RWCI leaders to identify vulnerable community members, it is not uncommon for those most in need to be excluded from additional support.

The registration process itself enacts social erasure whereby the intersecting dimensions of individual experience are reduced to demographic details and situated further under the membership of the household (Zetter, 1991; Harrell-Bond, 1986). Household sizes can range from one to sixteen members. Intra-household inequalities are thereby subsumed under household-level metrics and aid distribution despite evidence indicating that these inequalities disproportionately affect children – a point which UNHCR itself argues (Beltramo *et al.,* 2023). These erasures are also often counter to social and cultural expectations, which can lend themselves to contradictory terms of engagement with aid workers (as described in Chapter 3). As Graeber writes, 'In practice bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence' (2012, p. 119).

Based on rumours and past encounters with refugee infrastructures, either in Uganda or elsewhere, many new arrivals come with hopes and expectations of what they might benefit from within the settlement. While in the reception centre, UNHCR, OPM, WFP, and implementing partners 'sensitise new arrivals' on the governing principles of the settlement structure and of the rights afforded to them under Uganda's refugee policy. For example, their freedom to benefit from public services alongside Ugandan host community members, their freedom of movement, and their obligation to observe the laws of their host country. However, the ability to navigate and comprehend this structure varies greatly. In the absence of supporting volunteers, a family may not receive the appropriate communications owing to language barriers.[87] This can further complicate matters as individuals may not be fully aware of or unable to meet the conditions that

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[86] One example is a man who was supposed to distribute grinding machines to PSNs, took one for himself. He unfortunately ended up losing his fingers in an accident with that same machine.

[87] Even when translators were available, volunteer translators sometimes refused to communicate the instructions of OPM staff owing to fears that they would be held responsible in case people came to complain about unmet expectations later.

need to be met to access their entitlements or to update their documentation over the duration of displacement.

During registration, each household is allocated to one of the blocks and zones - the equivalent of a village and parish within Uganda's area system for national populations - within one of the seven zones that make up Rhino settlement. In this allocation process, pre-existing connections, including family boundaries, communities and relations of trust built through travel, aspirations, and preferences, are given low priority relative to ethnicised notions of identity.[88] Stites *et al.* (2021) emphasise the central role of shared experiences in creating social connections in displacement in West Nile and document the way that solidarities and connections built in transit can be disrupted by bureaucratic assignment to different settlements or blocks within settlements. Though this could be circumvented by self-settling in a preferred area or with prior connections, as the RWCIII noted, this was easier for those who 'knew the settlement from before' and so 'went to places where they knew it was good' (I-33).

The attestation document records formal classification of refugee status and the membership of the refugee household. It is an essential document for receiving support and provides one of two core refugee identification resources. The other - the individual refugee identity card - is an important document for accessing services and for onward movement because it is legitimated as an official document by the Republic of Uganda. It is given only to those aged 16 and above. Refugees sometimes have to wait until long after they have left the reception centre to receive their identity cards (NRC, 2018).

Allocated a plot

When the registration process is complete, the newly designated refugees are transported by truck to their plots. Those who are pregnant or have other mobility requirements are transported in a separate vehicle. At the point of relocation, households also receive a non-food items

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[88] Institutional procedures allocate plots on the basis of geographical and ethnic markers. The spatial segregation of diverse refugee populations has become starker over time. The decision to amplify the separation of ethnic groupings was made after a series of violent exchanges between refugees, including one incident during which four refugees were killed.

package and shelter kit. The core relief items include jerry cans, plastic buckets, solar lamps, cooking utensils, wooden poles, construction tools and mosquito nets. At times, cash-based support has also been provided in lieu of cooking fuel, soap, and sanitary pads. However, there is no guarantee that a household will receive these items, particularly with fluctuations in funding and widely documented mismanagement of funds (Titeca, 2021, 2023; O'Byrne, 2022).

Upon arrival, each household must clear and prepare their allocated land for habitation and agricultural production. These plots are, in many ways, the hallmark of the settlement infrastructure – a material commitment to enabling refugee self-reliance. Each registered refugee household is supposed to be allocated a standardised plot size. However, in practice, the plots vary by location and by availability, 'as of March 2017, only 55.1 percent of all refugees had land for arable household food production, with rates of access to land varying between settlements' (IRRI, 2018a, p. 4). Widespread pressures on Ugandan land and rising refugee populations constrain land access (Summers, 2017) - even established refugee households have had to give up parts of their plots to share with other households. Previously, households were allocated a plot for settlement and a larger plot for cultivation – now households are allocated a single plot (Poole, 2019, p. 22). In Nakivale, between 2015 and 2017, the average plot size for a newly arrived refugee household was just 10 m by 15 m (Omata, 2022, pp. 662-663).

Each household plot is supposed to provide space for shelter, an area for bathing, a latrine, and a garden for digging and cultivation -further limiting the agricultural capacity of the land. As 2022 Annual Results report noted, refugee households in Uganda farm on average 0.6 acres of land, well below the 2.5 acres recommended as a minimum for 'a household to transition from subsistence farming to resilient and growth-oriented production for the market' (UNHCR, 2023c, p. 22). Moreover, the usability of the allocated land varies widely, with much of the land allocated to refugees tending to be the less fertile areas of a given zone. This is a fact that Arua-based OPM staff readily acknowledged - noting that even a very skilled farmer using the full plot of land for agriculture would not be able to feed a family of six, 'It is too small, and that is before you look at the quality of the land' (I-144).

The process of establishing a home is often complex, relying heavily on social connections. As one woman who was relocated to Tika described: 'The only things we were given to build a

house was a carpet, and then you use sticks. They show you your plot, and it is up to you to clear it and do everything yourself' (I-36). She narrated how neighbouring South Sudanese young men contributed their labour to help her build a house for her and her young children. As this suggests, the arrival experience and the process of establishing oneself socially in the settlement is heavily conditioned by numerous factors. Factors that can ease the process of arrival and establishment include having prior linkages to the area, having relatives within the settlement, and how far your plot is from services. Those who are allocated to Tika zone find themselves in the remote reaches of Rhino settlement.[89] Tika tracks the Eastern fringe of Rhino settlement, which traces the Albert Nile as it journeys northwards towards South Sudan. By road, Tika is 61.2km from Arua City, 29.1km from Yoro base camp, where OPM and NGOs sit, and 14.3 km from Ocea reception centre (UNHCR, 2021). From the moment of arrival, the rights and entitlements projected onto refugees starkly contrast with the remote environment of the zone.

There are many other factors that shape the process of settling in an area. Prior knowledge of refugee infrastructures and linguistic skills tends to help. Though population pressures can strain services, they also draw services nearer as, in general, services are provided most readily to densely populated areas. As the RWCIII put it, 'partners look at the populations' (I-33). Access to additional resources, whether via remittances or items that people were able to travel with, also aids this initial period within this poorly resourced space. Others benefit from reduced care responsibilities as this provides greater flexibility to pursue the opportunities that do present themselves. For families with small children, even the act of constructing a brick house within your plot can become a significant risk. The bricks must be made and burned within that plot - this requires digging a large hole to contain the water that makes the bricks, which can pose a risk to children. As two men in their twenties explained: 'You are digging a very big hole ... when it is full of water, the child can fall into it and drown. Small kids, especially...' (I-127).

Individuals and connections are subsumed by the inflexibility of humanitarian bureaucratic procedures, producing a disjuncture between 'refugees' and the staff they encounter. For example, in their attempts to adjust to this spatial and social isolation, households will often defy

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[89] Tika is sometimes recorded in official documentation as Zone 4.

the rigidity of bureaucratic categorisation. One group of thirty-six young men and boys, aged between fourteen and twenty-three, arrived together in January 2018 after travelling from Warrap State. Despite registering under multiple households, they decided to reside together on one plot in Tika 4. Maguek, a young man in his early twenties describes the adaptive measures the group took to ensure their collective safety: 'We had a land of 50 m by 40 m, but half of this land was full of water, so the land we were able to use for construction was less than 30 m by 30 m… All we needed was to sleep there. There was no way we could dig there. They told us that if we wanted more plots, we should separate, but that would have meant being very far from each other… We were in fear – Tika was not stable, and we were staying in a different place where there were people who had never been with our parents … so we never separated' (I-34). Relying on the largest area among them, they decided to stay together.

Actions that deviate from the formal logic of the humanitarian system, like residing collectively rather than on the allocated plots or investing one's energy in non-agricultural activities, are often well-informed decisions. However, because they 'do not "perform" to the script prepared by [aid] organisations' (Omata, 2022, p. 870), decisions like these can be a source of frustration for those overseeing the refugee infrastructure. Very often, requests to be accommodated within the web of bureaucratic procedures that incorporate 'refugees' into the systems of protection are interpreted by aid agency staff as an indication of entitlement and arrogance among refugees. The minimisation of refugees' claims to rights, when they become recipients of aid, is a long-standing problem whereby 'the queues of people whose particular need has not been caught in that net are the bane of any agency office' (Harrell Bond, 1986, p. 302).

There is a second and equally fundamental problem with these attitudes and arguably with the assertion of rational choice. In many cases, a choice to diverge from the range of options presented under humanitarian logic will be a reflective decision based on available resources. Aid workers will often decry their frustration with what they see as refugees' refusal to engage with the 'rational' course of action. However, to deny the possibility of mistakes or misjudgements is to deny what Gordon called the 'right to complex personhood' (2008, p. 4). Recognition of complex personhood means creating space for the ways people 'remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognise and misrecognise themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles,

and also transform themselves' (*ibid.*). The resistance to alternative decision-making reflects both a lack of understanding of the context in which refugees live *and* a restricted sense of personhood for refugees.

Monthly distributions

At the onset of the 2013 conflict, all registered refugees were entitled to receive a 100% ration from WFP regardless of their length of stay.[90] Relatively ample funds, recognition of the hardships of life in displacement and limited agricultural capacity meant that humanitarian agencies offered rations as a necessary supplement to household-level production. Owing to resource constraints, however, the policy has been subject to numerous revisions. For the main period of my data collection, refugees who had been residing in Rhino settlement for more than three months received 60% of a minimum survival basket. Each household would receive approximately 5.9 USD per month for each registered household member. This was equivalent to 22,000 UGX as a cash-based transfer, and a roughly cost-equivalent quantity of maize, beans, cooking oil and salt as in-kind support (WFP and REACH, 2021).

Food insecurity remains high among refugees and has been growing in recent years – based on the Consolidated Approach for Reporting Indicators of Food Security (CARI), in 2023, only 1.5% of refugee households were food secure compared to 4.3% in 2022 (UNICEF *et al.*, 2023, p. v). The lack of nutritional diversity and the poor quality of the distributed items are a central concern for many households. As one man put it, 'The food insecurity coming now is worse than a person wanting to kill you. Then you can hide yourself. But when there is no food, where can you hide?' (I-135) One mother now residing in the city explained, 'The camp was not good for the children. There was no water. The only food you could eat was beans and maize every day, every morning, and every evening. And the maize from the grinding mill was not ok – the flour you get is not as good as the one in the market here in town' (I-36).

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[90] At the time of my research there were two GFA modalities in Rhino camp – cash or in-kind support. On a monthly basis GFA would be distributed on a zonal basis via Food Distribution Points. If a household fails to receive for three months in a row, their card will be registered inactive.

There are important variations among households that receive cash and in-kind rations. In many ways, CBT is more cost-effective than in-kind food distribution. The narrow range of goods provided through formal distribution and the need to generate small amounts of cash to meet other essential needs, such as soap, charcoal, clothing, and medications, also means that parts of rations are often sold and redistributed. OPM *et al.* detail how food assistance 'serves as a currency with which refugees acquire other necessities' (2020, p. 80), even to pay for the WFP-supplied maize seeds to be ground into flour, rendering it edible for consumption. This results in enormous inefficiencies relative to the cost of getting food to the settlement. It also produces hostility among citizen populations who would commonly complain that the 'refugees' would offer below-market prices for their relief items. The provision of assistance through CBT, therefore, limits the scope for these inefficiencies. The relative value of the rations varied in accordance with the purchasing power of the cash ration, affecting the relative position of those receiving CBT and those receiving in-kind food aid. CBT leaves households reliant on local markets and therefore vulnerable to inflationary effects on prices, which can be highly localised. To provide one example, Group 1 (who were receiving a 60% ration), could only purchase approximately '73% of the value of the food basket provided to in-kind beneficiaries in the same group, thus reducing the relative CBT ration value' (FEWS, 2023, p. 12).

With widespread economic insecurity, household size assumes particular importance as an avenue for redistributing meagre resources. Those with several children on their cards reported finding it easier to redistribute resources within the household according to need. As rations are allocated based on assessments of overall household needs and not that of the individual, each person on the card adds an equal amount of ration. Larger households find greater flexibility in distributing their rations according to household needs. Others supplement their meagre income by having extra people on their attestation cards. For some, these are family members who have long since left the settlement. Individuals could also bribe staff members to add 'ghost' people to their cards or purchase members of other households (Titeca, 2023). Rumours and awareness of the practice were widespread. During one distribution day, a friend had dropped his household card of nine members, and the woman who found the card insisted that he reimburse her 20,000 UGX as a reflection of her generosity in returning the card rather than selling it to someone else.

While there has been a great deal of publicity around the inflation of refugee numbers in Uganda, it is also true that actual household sizes can often outnumber those recognised on attestation cards. Households often have unregistered members, which results in additional strain on limited household resources. In 2020, this problem reportedly affected 10% of households in RCS (OPM *et al.,* 2020, pp. 81, 112). There can be delays of many months before documented household sizes can be revised to reflect the fluctuations in household membership. With overburdened caseloads (UNHCR, 2023b, p. 3), staff numbers are insufficient to ensure that the bureaucratic infrastructure is equipped to handle these issues promptly. As a result, people who arrive after the main registration periods can challenge household budgets, as can newborn children. The modes of food distribution also bring complications, including delayed distribution and missed items owing to breaks in pipelines. Additionally, the head of the household is the core member vested with responsibility for allocated ration – yet when this person is unavailable, whether, for health reasons or employment, bureaucratic infrastructures rigidly adhere to formalised guidelines in ways that further constrain the agency of refugees and in ways that deny the lived realities and social expectations of the context they work in.

In one instance, a UNHCR staff member monitoring a litigation desk during a data verification exercise rejected a request to merge two households (O-8). A South Sudanese man had requested that his household and that of his single sister be merged. As his wife and sister sat next to him, he explained that his sister worked and was unable to collect her monthly ration. If they were to merge, then his wife could collect the ration for both households and ensure that no one missed their distribution. Despite rejecting this request based on UNHCR's 'nuclear family model', the staff member went on to insist that, although the request was denied, the man should, according to custom, remember his responsibilities to his sister by providing help where possible.

This was just one of several practices where staff members enacted double speak by referring to custom as the basis for a shared moral world between the South Sudanese man and himself to deflect institutional responsibility for the unyielding impracticalities of humanitarian assistance (see Chapter 8). Humanitarian staff repeatedly and deftly oscillated between professional and personal rhetoric, speaking at once from an organisational standpoint and a shared moral framing. In this instance, the organisational rhetoric was implicitly demarcated as outside local contextual realities. I do not include this to normatively critique such a dualistic framing, as

anthropologist Blair Sackett (2022) observed, humanitarian staff are often situated in diverse power dynamics themselves.

Water

Tensions between the spatial, social, and ecological limits of the refugee policy collide with the lack of provisioning in ways that make the most fundamental aspects of life extremely difficult. Though efforts have repeatedly been made to improve the available infrastructure, as water availability has increased, populations relying on those services have also increased. As a result, residents resort to extreme measures to secure some water when water is scarce. As well as direct health risks, the lack of access to sufficient clean water creates multiple forms of social insecurity. Residents of Tika 4 report regularly having to walk two hours to collect water from a nearby river, contributing to heavily gendered social insecurity.

Access to vital resources continues to be monetised, depriving those unable to afford these additional costs. Faced with walking to the river to collect unclean water, if the resources are available, households can pay 2000 UGX for a boda boda rider to deliver a single jerry can (approximating 25 litres of water). To put this in context, as of 2022, 2000 UGX was equivalent to 9% of the monthly GFA distribution value for an individual. The few with iron sheet roofs can catch the water during the rainy season. Efforts to bring services under government oversight further instil variegated inclusion according to wealth. Those who can afford to do so pay 50,000 UGX for the Ugandan government's Northern Umbrella of Water and Sanitation to install a water tap on their plot. Even if you have installed the tap, there is no guarantee that your water will be operational. As Aliir narrated, after paying 50,000 UGX to install the tap and a further 50,000 shillings per month, the tap remained dry in his homestead. It took over six months for it to be functional (I-145).

The lack of access to water also creates competition at water access sites (IRRI, 2019, pp. 32-3). Disputes frequently arose at water points, which became social sites, particularly as people often had to wait in long queues to gain access. As a result of these constraints, refugees and national populations compete over these resources with conflicting senses of entitlement. Ugandan host populations experience these resources as a benefit of their benevolence in giving refugee households space to stay through access to their land. Meanwhile, South Sudanese households

argued that 'if it were not for us, the nationals would not have access to these resources' (I-127). In 2020, implementing partners installed taps within Tika to ease access to water. The water source was a tank located in a nearby Ugandan village. The taps had reportedly only been working for a few months before the September 2020 incident. On my first encounter with Tika 4, the taps had reportedly been dry for months. One resident illustrated this point to me, pointing to the line of jerrycans lined up tidily in front of the dry taps, as shown in Figure 8. Since their installation, host community members have repeatedly cut the pipes leading to the taps. INGO workers report that this problem stemmed from the 'ignorance' of the host community members who would cut into the taps further upstream to access the water directly on their land (O-11). South Sudanese interviewees experienced this as a direct act of aggression aimed at depriving the refugees residing in Tika. Though INGOs conducted sensitisation activities to 'educate' the host community. Tika 4 residents noted that the INGOs responsible for constructing and maintaining the taps, 'lose interest because it keeps happening – they say they are tired of it. That they are losing money' (I-34). Regardless of intentionality, the material-spatial consequences force South Sudanese households to take extreme measures to meet their needs.

Figure 8 - Empty jerry cans lined up by a dry communal tap in Tika 4. Source: Brown, 2022.

Household production

In a bid to promote 'self-reliance', aid agencies encourage households to maximise outputs using their plots of land. However, in addition to the limitations on land noted earlier, the land allocated for refugee-hosting tends to be among the least fertile in the area. Over-cultivation and adverse weather conditions add further challenges. Field-based staff are acutely aware of these compounding factors. An NRC paralegal explained, 'In Tika and parts of Ofua, you cannot grow anything. In Tika, the soil is too sandy. If you plant something, within a few days, it will burn. In Ofua, it is too rocky. It is too dry' (I-208). Even under favourable circumstances, it can still take a year to see results from agricultural production (O'Byrne, 2020, p. 7).

Despite the extensive scholarly critique of agricultural self-reliance in northern Uganda, programming continues to revolve around agricultural interventions. Agricultural programming has typically involved seed distribution and promoting what is described as 'mindset changes' among refugees, away from 'dependency', with minimal reflection on the productivity thresholds facing households (see, for example, Kyatuka, 2021). Meanwhile, in UNHCR's head office in Kampala, senior staff lamented the poor attitude of South Sudanese people towards farming (O-10). Ultimately, characterisations such as these place blame on South Sudanese people for 'failing' to achieve self-reliance rather than recognising the structural constraints they face. It also neglects the reality that UNHCR characterises the 'South Sudanese refugee situation … as a children's crisis, with over 520,000 South Sudanese children registered as refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda' (UNHCR, 2023b, p. 3). This is relative to an overall population of 882,765 South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. This places constraints on the potential productivity among the population and, when resources are scarce, creates child protection risks.

Access to additional land is a critical issue for refugee households, as is reflected in the work of several partner organisations that seek to address this issue. Attempts to bargain with host community members often go wrong. Figure 9 illustrates this point - as acknowledged by the poster stuck to the door of a small shop in Ocea, Rhino settlement. South Sudanese residents enter informal contracts with Ugandan landholders who can later deny them access to their

produce (UNHCR, 2023b, p. 6). Competing claims over land can also see South Sudanese households paying twice or even three times for the same plot (O-9).[91]

Figure 9 - An advocacy poster concerning forced evictions. Source: Brown, 2022.

Income-generating activities form a vital tenet of the self-reliance narrative underpinning Uganda's refugee policy, but the remote location of Rhino limits access to markets (Kaiser, 2006, p. 601). Though this is also true of Ugandans who face in-situ dispossession, for non-citizen populations, limited social networks and access to land amplify these challenges. For example, even if they raise enough capital to purchase livestock, there is little they can do within the confines of their allocated plots of land, and they are unable to secure alternative space for grazing. 'You are not allowed to fish, you have no net, you don't know the language, it is a risk, [the local population] may not allow you' (I-135). As two interlocutors described: 'When organisations come and say they want to build houses for PSNs, refugees cannot participate to

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[91] Ugandan INGO worker described on the dramatic increases in land prices by national populations in response to the food prioritisation exercise.

make money. The host community intervenes to deny them the opportunity because you cannot go beyond your 30x30. They will tell you that you are misusing the land they have given you, saying, "You did not come with your land from South Sudan". It is the same for the charcoal. If you want to make charcoal, you must go to the LC1 or the landlord to make an agreement on the specific tree, and then you can cut the tree; they will not allow you to just cut any tree. Yet for [Ugandans], they cut any tree. They can even come near your house and burn the charcoal there' (I-127). These conditions contribute to the experience of allocated plots as sources of restriction and surveillance.

Services

The costs of accessing even basic government services render flows of vital materials inaccessible for those who cannot afford them. Educational and health services often incur hidden costs. These realities echo observations made in Arua district in the early 2000s – even with a diagnosis, the 'follow-up prescription drugs are often unavailable or unaffordable' (Hovil and Werker, 2001, p. 27). As it was then, so it is now. Concerning education, both citizens and non-citizens face additional costs over the course of the school year, which renders universal free primary education an economic aspiration. These include uniform fees, PTA fees, examination fees, and contributions to the costs of feeding pupils. Though some access additional support from partner organisations, ongoing cutbacks to services and additional sources of support perpetuate further impoverishment. In some cases, there are simply no facilities to speak of - as stressed by the Ministry of Education and Sports, the accessibility of secondary schools is an issue for both host and refugee populations - some sub-counties still do not have a single secondary school (2018, p. 16).

Nyaring, an older woman residing in Tika 4 explained, 'We worry about how our children will study here. After leaving primary, we will not afford for them to go to secondary school. Children are undergoing scholastic challenges. My elder son is in P7, and for final candidates, it is 40,000 shillings per term.[92] Other demands will still come, but I have not been given clear information yet. The uniform for shorts and for shirts each was 19,000' (I-146). Nyaring

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[92] P7 is the final year of primary school in Uganda.

proceeded to describe the affective and relational challenges that these challenges bring: 'As women, the whole responsibility of the household is on us… The small rations bring misunderstandings within the family, between children and their parents. The children feel as though their parents are hiding goods from them. They do not have a good understanding. We cannot buy them shoes or whatever they need… We are just keeping quiet because we do not have any other option. This 20,000 UGX will not do anything… we do not have adequate soap. I do not feel comfortable in terms of hygiene. Others do not even have undergarments. We are just moving like that. You can even look at my physical appearance. I did not look like this before…' During the interview, Nyaring gestured to herself as embodied evidence of the effects of life in displacement. She was dressed in an unwashed shirt bearing the red cross logo and faded, splintering green slippers. Her two grass-thatched houses were in an obvious state of disrepair. The smaller of the two was uninhabitable. The roof was falling away. The larger of the two was constructed in 2021. The materials for that one cost approximately 240,000 UGX. The roof of the smaller house was visibly falling away. It was built in 2020 for 150,000 UGX. She explained, 'The houses are just like that because I have nothing to construct them'.

Due to the lack of financial resources and the corresponding lack of opportunities to generate additional income or challenge the structural conditions of settlement life, many live in cycles of perpetual dependence, not on the protection infrastructure but on each other. Shocks to income – including, for example, increased market costs, sickness, death, injury - play a significant role in the incidence of poverty at a given moment (Atamanov *et al.,* 2021). When confronted with a setback, refugees are more likely to reduce food consumption or rely on borrowing when faced with a shock relative to citizen populations. In some cases, the entire ratio will be spent on repaying debts incurred over the previous months. Nyaring narrated the ongoing challenges with debt, which accumulated when her son fell ill. Unable to reach the health centre owing to its distance, Nyaring took her son to the nearby clinic in Tika 2. They helped him on the condition that she would give her entire ration at the next distribution. 'I gave it all, and now there is nothing completely. We are just surviving through the help of our neighbours…' (I-146). Rather than becoming increasingly *self*-reliant over time, South Sudanese households often rely on debt and interdependence.

Protection

Notwithstanding the risks posed by localised violence within and between households, the structures of protection themselves often act as infrastructures of violence. For example, LCs are responsible for monitoring security in their elected jurisdiction. At the block level, refugee residents in the relevant areas are encouraged to bring their security concerns to LCs. The opening vignette highlights the vulnerabilities this can create in the absence of alternate accountability and protection mechanisms. Similarly, RWCs are often accused of favouring their friends and relatives in distribution, creating additional vulnerability risks when RWCs are made the sole arbiters of the distribution of relief to vulnerable community members. The infrastructures that supposedly welcome feedback and empower refugee voices make the expression of those voices exceedingly difficult. If refugees want to raise serious concerns, it is common for them to have to transport themselves up to the base camp at Yoro, where the settlement offices for OPM, UN bodies and implementing partners are. For those far from Yoro, this could mean a twenty-kilometre journey on foot.

This is compounded by what is perceived as a disinterested and, at times, actively hostile infrastructure of protection. Several South Sudanese refugees who complained about the lack of access to food in the settlement reported being told by OPM staff, 'You did not come here to eat' (I-135, 146). Moreover, South Sudanese people indicated their perception that local UNHCR and NGO staff were largely synonymous with the various agencies of the Ugandan government and therefore could not be trusted to enact change. Many interlocutors expressed the belief that 'our feedback stops at Yoro' (I-146). Comments such as these express a widespread frustration with the entrapment produced by the geographical and social isolation that South Sudanese people face in RCS. Even if they can express themselves, they feel that they are ensnared – their feedback remains confined to the settlement. As a former community leader in Tika commented, 'The protection here is only that it is a peaceful country. Otherwise, we are not protected... It is not that security is ok, only that Uganda is a peaceful country' (I-34). In a focus group discussion, Tika 4 residents noted, 'We are not allowed to protect ourselves. We are forbidden from forming our own forms of security. But at the same time, the police do nothing and are never around anyway' (F-2). The hierarchies of power governing the settlement render refugees and their problems invisible.

The relationship between the bureaucratic enforcement of structural and symbolic violence is intimately bound up with the lingering threat of direct physical violence. Direct violence is an unrelenting possibility of life as a refugee. Those who spoke out recounted experiences of being threatened or warned off from raising their complaints further. These threats were substantiated by sporadic moments of direct violence, as in the opening vignette for this chapter – despite Tika residents raising their concerns and reasoning for resisting return, the refugees who had fled to Adjumani were eventually beaten and forcibly loaded into vehicles, which brought them back to Tika. These are 'forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm' (Graeber, 2006, p. 112). The power structures and bureaucratic instruments that govern the settlement persistently work against the rights and entitlements of refugees and are relayed through threats and demonstrations of direct violence. This is in keeping with accounts of the Ugandan state and asylum governance writ large. The Ugandan government's violent and sporadic assertions of authority over refugees also evoke Rebecca Tapscott's (2021) concept of 'arbitrary violence' whereby the Ugandan government relies on the production of uncertainty through unpredictable, violent intervention to minimise dissent. This arbitrary deployment of force induces self-policing and undermines the political autonomy of those who might otherwise resist it. Similar patterns have been observed in France (Davies *et al.,* 2017), Italy (Tazzioli, 2020), and elsewhere in Uganda (Torre, 2023).

Are we really empowered?

Ultimately, the material conditions of the camp intersect with settlement, national policies, social and cultural restrictions, making it near-enough impossible to meet basic needs. As Nyaring describes, 'For those of us who came a long time ago, they [donors] believe we are empowered, but this land, even if you cultivate, nothing will come. They give most of the support to new arrivals. But are we really empowered?' (I-146) Aid programmes and performative reporting mechanisms fail to capture this reality. Beneficiaries 'are treated as "products" to showcase impact to a wide range of organisations in their attempts to meet the requirements of donor audiences' (Omata, 2024, p. 884). At every turn, institutional powers prioritise the existence of the policy framework and its de jure rights over the lived experience of refugees under these arrangements. The government of Uganda's approach to refugees reflects an instrumentalisation of refugees for the purposes of securing international financial support, and international and

domestic political support (Betts, 2021; Titeca, 2021) 'at the expense of the refugees' priorities and of protection of their rights' (Kaiser, 2005, p. 364). Mayen described, '… without having a choice, you will remain here. It is like being in custody' (I-135). While Uganda's policy promises to bring refugees on a 'journey' towards self-reliance, the material context makes that impossible. Despite the promises of entitlements bestowed by the humanitarian bureaucracy, refugees experience the settlement as a carceral space.

Regional mobilities

Government officials, international agencies, and NGOs depoliticise onward movement as an act of opportunism by the wealthy. However, these narratives deflect attention away from the inhibiting conditions of inequality and abuses of power that condition spaces of supposed refuge. Meanwhile, writing against narratives that portray refugees as passive and helpless victims, scholars have argued for greater recognition of mobility as one of the many solutions refugees rely on in difficult circumstances (for example, Hovil, 2007; O'Byrne and Ogeno, 2020). However, reflecting on the theorisation of subaltern resistance, the emphasis on agency often 'overlook[s] the crucial fact that these practices occur mostly within the prevailing systems of power' (Bayat, 2013, p. 45). As the September 2020 incident reveals, the circumstances of leaving the settlement often have little to do with financial independence, beyond being able to afford the initial transport out of the settlement. Examining the intersecting registers of violence and their relationship with mobility positions these registers of multi-locality as a direct result of the refugee architecture and the violence of humanitarian bureaucracy.[93] The policies, power imbalances and material conditions inflicted upon spaces and subjects without attention to their regional ecological and historical realities perpetuate onward mobilities. That reality is hidden in work, which stresses agential mobilities.

The restricted spatiality of humanitarian support in Uganda, which frames refugees as those residing in settlements, means that South Sudanese refugees residing elsewhere continue to interface with the bureaucratic infrastructure as one of the few viable opportunities for legal

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[93] Direct threats to physical safety as a reason for shifting to urban areas in West Nile are not new (Lomo and Hovil 2004, p. 34; Kaiser *et al.,* 2005).

legitimation and material support. The demarcation of certain spaces in terms of rights, entitlements, and accessibility multiplies the mobilities that South Sudanese people draw on in displacement. Across towns, cities, and borders, South Sudanese people registered as refugees but residing outside of settlements, rely on mobility to exercise the rights they are entitled to under Uganda's enabling policy environment. In other words, for those who leave the settlement, survivability under these conditions is often embedded in mobility. This mobility can be understood as an agential act; however, these choices are made in constrained conditions, which can only be understood in conversation with unmet needs, desires, and entrenched destitution (Hammond, 2008). Regional mobility under this lens becomes a self-making strategy undertaken as part of a response to the violence enabled and sustained by the humanitarian infrastructure. South Sudanese people embody the consequences of this policy as they return to the settlement on a monthly basis, conducting their movements around the sometimes-unreliable distribution schedule.

Conclusion

Taking an expansive view of oppression, this chapter has traced the conditions of mobility across the multiple registers of violence, entrapment and containment described by my interlocutors. Contemporary accounts and perceptions of mobility fail to full account for the direct and indirect forms of violence that often drive relocation and are differentially experienced by diverse populations. Rather than honing in on the isolated journeys of refugees, which can lead us to lose sight of the broader environs in which refugees are situated, this chapter has situated attempts to leave the settlement in a broader structural critique of life in the settlement. Centring the structural conditions draws out the inadequacy of humanitarian support and the wilful neglect of the humanitarian-state complex. In the following chapter, I consider movements of South Sudanese people to and from Arua City. The movements I am concerned with are not collectively orchestrated nor narrated as political acts, but are, nonetheless, a direct challenge to statist spatial designations. The journeys undertaken in response to the multiple incidents of direct violence and the lack of everyday protection in the settlement space reflect Yiftachel's observations of quiet encroachment. In his examination of the Beersheba metropolitan region in Negev desert, Yiftachel draws on the idea of encroachment (2009, pp. 252-3) to centre gray spacing as a destabilizing force, a 'slow encroachment of the ordinary …

made of thousands of small movements in spaces of survival and stealth, neither fully coordinated, nor fully articulated, but cumulatively significant to upset the prevailing urban order'.

Chapter 5: City-makers

This chapter examines the role of policy in structuring the terms of inclusion for South Sudanese people in Arua and highlights the adaptive ways that people make ends meet. In doing so, it emphasises the rich connections between refugee and, supposedly, non-refugee spaces. While acknowledging diverse classed experiences, it stresses the precarity of urban residence for many and points to the dense relational networks that South Sudanese households often rely on to make ends meet.

Introduction

As described by an LCI in Arua City, South Sudanese populations 'can be found in all corners of the city' (I-124), even down to the village level. The spatial distribution of refugee households alone reflects the scale and heterogeneity of South Sudanese urban residences – from the densely populated River Oli division to the outer fringes of the city in Pajulu to Mvara, a ward in Arua Hill division associated with more spacious and secure housing (ACTED *et al.,* 2018a-i). Many have come to Arua directly from South Sudan, and others have relocated to the town from one of the many camps across the northern region of Uganda. The effects of these populations are materially evident throughout the city as they construct churches, rent property, consume goods and services, and convene community functions. Contrary to common assumptions, few rely on remittances from outside the continent, and few live in conditions of material security.

This chapter raises important questions about the terms of inclusion in the city and points to the ways the displacement architecture informs Arua's economy, rhythms, and social life. The chapter opens with the circulation between the city and the settlement and their relationship to refugee legislation and governance relationships. It shows that the same policy that entrenches the hardships of camp life enforces ongoing reliance on the camp as the only vehicle of formal legitimacy and material support. Secondly, it stresses the uneven costs of urban residence for South Sudanese households. Demands for cash infiltrate almost all areas of urban life – food, education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and rent. Thirdly, the chapter engages with the circulations which occur between Food Distribution Points (FDPs) in the settlement and the city, which in turn contribute significantly to the vibrancy of Arua's economy. In doing so, it draws the camp and city together in a stretched architecture of refuge. The fourth section addresses the contingency of financial independence. It challenges the linear assumptions

underpinning notions of self-reliance and stresses the gaps that result for those who deviate from that sequence. The fifth draws out survival structures and interdependencies that shape urban refuge.

Contemporary circulations

South Sudanese people who remain in Uganda but have left the settlement and have not taken up residence within Kampala fall into a policy grey zone. Under formal policy mandates, refugees who exercise their right to freedom of movement would, based on their choice to reside outside formally recognised refugee spaces, be considered to have achieved a level of self-sufficiency. They are, in effect, formally understood to be self-declaring that they no longer need to rely on humanitarian support. In deference to these policy constraints, OPM and UN staff in Arua, intent on towing the official line, repeatedly reminded me that 'we have no refugees in the city' (I-156).

Despite formal denial, the presence of refugees in Arua is informally sanctioned. After nodding to official policy, OPM staff assumed a different register, 'Of course we know that they are there' (I-156). A telling reflection of the national government's posture toward refugees in Arua is the contrast between the accessibility of the OPM offices in the capital and Arua. In Kampala, refugees are treated with violent contempt. For example, when collecting my approval letters from the OPM office in the early days of my research, as I walked down the marram track leading to the office, I encountered multiple layers of security enforcement officers. They were preventing refugees and asylum seekers from coming closer to the offices with the threat of physical violence. By contrast, in Arua, the gates of OPM are open, and people enter freely.[94] The Regional Desk Officer himself is often in active communication with the numerous leaders of various South Sudanese communities in the city.

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[94] In Kampala, access to UNHCR is difficult and refugees are often treated with outright hostility (Sandvik, 2012, pp. 115-116; Lyytinen, 2015, pp. 161-170). Sandvik (2011) notes that in Kampala the UNHCR office is strategically located in hard to reach areas, away from the relevant populations of would-be beneficiaries. In Arua UNHCR also has a tightly observed security gate and can be accessed by personal appointment only.

Despite the highly visible presence of refugees in the city, there has been little investment by the refugee response infrastructure in Arua beyond the locations of humanitarian offices and the spillover effects associated with their presence. The humanitarian and development agency offices are largely located in Mvara, a relatively affluent area of Arua which sits behind the golf course and is populated by hotels as much as by humanitarian offices. These offices are not really intended to be accessible by those in the city. Across the city, the road infrastructures, the jeeps and 4x4s that service humanitarian transport and signposting all favour the spatial production of this as a displacement economy, oriented towards the production and management of the camps in the region. This reifies established precedents - UNHCR was responsible for funding the construction of the first tarmacked road in the former municipality, a road which was built in service of this industry and not for the benefit of the general population (Leopold, 2005, p. 39).

Meanwhile, the lack of formal recognition in the secondary city limits the availability of formalised support in Arua. Where OPM, as the voice of the government concerning refugees, insists that 'refugees' are only those in camps, (I)NGOs and international institutions must follow suit. In this way, South Sudanese people are not denied the right to claim the 'refugee' category, but they are denied spatial recognition. This has important consequences for the types of assistance and services they can access. As a CARE staff member narrated: 'Every now and then [we will] help a "survivor" who is within the city here. And even though UNCHR will not accept the urban refugees, they will sometimes call upon CARE to provide support for a refugee residing within the urban' (I-123). As this suggests, help can sometimes be accessed informally on an exceptional basis, but it cannot be accessed uniformly or through official avenues. Owing to this bureaucratic invisibilisation, there is minimal scope to expand the sources of support for those who choose to reside in the city. An NRC programme, initiated in 2022 - the first formalised programme providing a service specifically targeting 'urban migrants' in Arua city - had to remake its signs before launching to remove the word refugees. The systematic denial of refugee presence beyond camps has limited the possibility of programming openly for refugees in the urban arena. Within the urban space, civil society, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and local branches of the state are constrained by the same policy that permits and propels onward movement.

Settlements are the only spaces in West Nile where South Sudanese people can register as refugees and acquire formal documentation. South Sudanese people who register as refugees are bureaucratically linked to the settlement, which formally documents and legitimises their presence within Uganda. School registrars and healthcare providers often request proof of identity. Meanwhile, LCs sometimes request this proof so that South Sudanese households who are new residents in their area can be verified with OPM (I-124). Senior OPM staff encouraged South Sudanese residents of Arua to register during the verification process (O-8). They have several incentives to encourage this practice, as larger population numbers create scope for more resources to be channelled to the refugee response at large.

The costs of urban residence

Demands for cash infiltrate almost all areas of urban service access and consumption for South Sudanese households – food items, education, healthcare, water, and rent. Okello, an RWCII in Rhino Camp, narrated, 'It is very difficult for us to make life within the urban. You will rent the house, kitchen, and latrine. If the landlord has a plot with vegetables and water within, you will not touch it. Even the grass, even if it is down. Nothing is for free' (I-118). Okello's statement speaks to a contrast between non-citizen populations and West Nilers, who are more likely to be able to assert claims over resources in their home country. In this section, I address the discriminatory terms of the urban economy as a lingering tension underpinned by highly ethnicised concerns over the uneven accumulation of resources in South Sudan and as a reflection of the refugee policy architecture.

Discriminatory approaches to pricing infiltrate most aspects of life in the urban arena.[95] As Okello explained: 'If Ugandans rent one room for 20,000 UGX. You, refugees, will rent 50,000 UGX. Nationals will be given a lower rate, foreigners more. And this is done secretly. When coming to the school during registration, they will ask if you are South Sudanese or Ugandan. If you are a non-Ugandan, they will treat you differently. There are a lot of differences in how we are treated: marriages, and even transport. [Whatever] you need to buy, you are treated

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[95] It is worth reiterating that this feature is not isolated to the urban sphere. Refugees widely report being charged high rates for land rental in and around settlements.

differently. Not only assets, but also food. They will ask how much you have. If you are keen enough, you will realise the treatment is different.' (I-118). Traders, landlords, healthcare, and education providers seek to extract additional profits from what they identify as a homogenous population of South Sudanese city residents. An LCI located the source of financial instability for refugees as follows, '[South Sudanese] like this high life' (I-124). Aid agency staff, too, would repeat the notion by informing me that 'the only refugees in town are those with money' (I-129). The discriminatory pricing mechanisms, which often lead to higher costs for South Sudanese (and Congolese) consumers, are borne in part from widespread perceptions of wealth among these non-citizen populations. Early arrivals from South Sudan often migrated in pursuit of education, and many were embedded in regional trade networks. As a result of these encounters and highly visible displays of wealth among a few – often the family members of generals in the Sudan People's Liberation Party (SPLA)[96] – South Sudanese people were widely perceived to be reaping the disproportionate rewards of oil money and conflict. The prominence of 'military wives', who arrived in expensive cars and rented homes in gated compounds, combined with the relative strength of the South Sudanese economy relative to Uganda, contributed to lingering and highly ethnicised perceptions of extravagance. As a result, many Ugandans interpreted the arrival of SPLA family members in Arua as evidence of elite migration and the highly ethnicised accounts of the political economy of civil war.

Ethnic divisions—particularly between Dinka and Equatorian populations—remain a central axis of tension in South Sudan's post-independence landscape. These divisions are not merely legacies of war but are continuously re-articulated through claims to urban space, militarised narratives of liberation, and uneven access to state resources (Branch and Mampilly, 2005). In this context, Dinka identity often becomes entangled with hegemonic state power, producing an ethnicised economy of privilege in which certain bodies are seen to 'belong' more fully to the nation. As several of my interlocutors explained, this privilege was not abstract—it was material and embodied. Physical features, such as height and darker skin tone, became legible signs of ethnic belonging and political proximity to the state. These embodied markers, in turn, shaped

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[96] Known, since 2018, as the South Sudan People's Defence Forces.

who was understood to be a legitimate refugee and who was not (see also Hovil and Werker, 2001, p. 11).

Critical refugee studies urge us to move beyond such humanitarian binaries of 'vulnerable' versus 'privileged' by attending to the ways in which refugees are racialised, classed, and spatialised through intersecting regimes of visibility, assistance, and suspicion. In Arua's markets, these hierarchies were constantly negotiated. Refugees who could 'pass' as Ugandan—by speaking local languages, being shorter, or having lighter skin—were often able to move with greater ease, access work, and evade the hypervisibility associated with being 'foreign'. For others, whose bodies were read through the lens of Dinka-ness—tall and dark skinned - or who were seen to be visibly enjoying relative privilege, were more likely to face social exclusion and economic marginalisation.

As historian Cherry Leonardi writes, overly simplified ethnicized accounts mask transethnic moral discourses concerning government corruption and the uneven distribution of wealth in South Sudan's political economy. Writing at the cusp of secession, Leonardi argues for a cross-cutting sense of unease about 'the commodification and monetization of productive and reproductive resources' (2011, p. 216). These debates represent long-standing concerns over the relationship between state and society and have 'reproduced a binary distinction between the values of an idealised moral economy of kinship and reciprocity, and the immoral, individualistic cultures of money and town' (*ibid.*). These ideas have cross-border relevance. As Leonardi explained in the context of South Sudan, these debates point to 'wider underlying moral concerns about the encroachment of an urban, monetary economy, associated historically with army and government, into rural economies' (*ibid.*, p. 217). As indicated in Chapter 3, Arua too carries some of these same legacies, with urban residence being associated with privileged access to material resources, social capital, and services. Within the urban arena, markers of wealth are varied and can produce social friction which are not exclusively reserved for South Sudanese people. One of my Ugandan colleagues offhandedly complained that because of his 'naturally larger figure' people would assume he had wealth and made increasing demands for him to share that wealth. Understood within these debates over the moral economy, these tensions point to attempts to level out the uneven accumulation of resources in the urban economy and the

underlying justifications of discriminatory pricing mechanisms, which are enacted by market stall traders, roadside vendors, and landlords as a way to level out inequalities.

These notions rest on widely held, highly problematic and exclusionary assumptions of class, whereby urban residence is misconstrued as the preserve of elites. This discourse not only distorts the reality of everyday urban life but also actively marginalises both citizen and non-citizen poor. In Gulu, this was most starkly revealed during an interview with a technical staff member of the city administration. Responding to local complaints about the demolition of homes and businesses to make way for new tarmacked roads, a senior official dismissed the concerns outright: 'Gulu is not your compound' (I-130). With no remorse, he suggested that anyone unable to sustain themselves in town should simply return to the village. Such statements are not just dismissive—they reflect a broader ideology of urban exclusivity, in which the displacement of the poor is framed as necessary for the collective progress of the city.

Yet this logic erases the structural and historical forces that push people into cities in the first place. As critical scholars have argued, the urban periphery is often a space of strategic refuge—a response to rural land disputes, violence, and economic dispossession. The official's claim that 'everyone has a village to fall back on' overlooks generational shifts in urban life. For many younger residents—especially those born or raised in towns—the rural is not a familiar place of retreat but a space of exclusion and uncertainty. Therefore, this narrative is doubly violent: it assumes access to land and social ties that may no longer exist, or may never have existed at all.

Nevertheless, non-citizens are even more likely to face these challenges. Osuta, a young and charismatic local council leader in one of Arua's densely populated cell, described the compounded precarity of South Sudanese refugees: 'People are constrained financially. For us, as Ugandans, we can move to the village, but for the ones here, if they are refugees, things are very hard' (I-124). Ultimately, ideas that urban residence is the exclusive preserve of the wealthy ultimately end up working against those who face severe material hardship, marginalisation, and the destabilising effects of urban poverty. This plays out both in a lack of bureaucratic mechanisms for social welfare and in the discriminatory pricing practices which further entrench material inequalities for heterogenous refugee populations. The mechanisms of this are addressed in Chapter 7 through a focus on processes of urban removal.

Early impressions of South Sudanese arrivals in the city and the materially minimal articulations of need common among West Nilers also produce highly stigmatising discourses about who constitutes a legitimate refugee. On a legal basis, South Sudanese citizens may be entitled to claim prima facie refugee status, but on a social basis, the real refugees were those who were willing to live in the settlement. In popular discourse among Ugandan aid workers and city residents, the status of refugee and its concomitant material entitlements should be reserved for those who lack economic resources. Willingness to live in the settlement was interpreted as evidence of genuine need. These dynamics are amplified by the policy itself, which designates rural settlements as the legitimate space of refuge for South Sudanese citizens. The spatialised framework of Uganda's refugee response architecture further entrenches these notions by presupposing the financial stability of non-citizen urban residents when, in reality, the refugee population is highly heterogeneous.

Similarly, unsympathetic sentiments were echoed by the staff of OPM and other local government officials who insisted that if they could not financially sustain themselves in the city, South Sudanese households should relocate to the camp. If South Sudanese households faced financial challenges in the urban environs, government authorities expressed various sentiments that the appropriate place for poor urban residents is within the rural locales – made most explicit in the claims of government officials, NGO, and UN staff that 'there are no urban refugees outside of Kampala' (I-129, 130, 161). Those unable to make ends meet are invariably told that they should leave the urban space. Even if a household agrees to relocate to the settlement, if they had not sought permission from OPM for their original relocation to the city (as stipulated by the 2010 Refugee Regulations), they were told they should not expect any help from the government or UNHCR to facilitate their return to the settlement. A paralegal on a short-term contract with the NRC working on housing challenges recalled being told by OPM staff in Arua: 'They got themselves to the city, they can bring themselves back to the settlement' (I-159). Ultimately, because they fall outside the remit of refugee law, there are no protection mechanisms in place to deal with their predicament.

As well as the implication that city spaces like Arua are not legitimate places for refugees to reside unless they are financially independent, the Refugee Act 2006 and Refugee Regulations 2010 introduce opportunities for discriminatory pricing. For example, in accordance with the

2010 Refugee Regulations, refugees are unable to own land in Uganda. This compels South Sudanese households into the rental market. As Okello suggested (I-118), housing is one of the major outgoings for refugee households in the city. A 2024 VNG International report documented that over 70% of refugee households in Arua rent, and on average, 68% of household income is spent on housing (p. 69). Often, each additional resource and service is chargeable. When renting a two-room house, for example, you may also need to supplement this, for example, to access a cooking space or a latrine. Facilities are often shared among many households. One city resident explained that in his accommodation, 'There is a pit latrine and open roof bathroom, but these facilities are shared by five families (more than 40 people), so I feel insecure. I want to find somewhere less congested to rent' (I-131). Reliance on overpopulated community services is an unpleasant and undignified experience, which raises significant protection risks.

Meanwhile, discussions of material grievances among South Sudanese persons are often located in the behaviours or decisions of the individual. Ostua jokingly observed that for refugees in his area, 'The first requirement is power and electricity. Ugandans do not mind. It is normal for them. Congolese as well are also becoming like my brothers from South Sudan' (I-124). Implicit in Osuta's reflection is what he sees as the differences between Ugandan material expectations and those of South Sudanese and Congolese residents. To him, Ugandans are ready to accept their limited economic capacity, while his 'brothers from South Sudan' seek luxuries, like power. These generalised notions have stigmatising effects that often amount to affective dismissal, which undermines the challenges that South Sudanese (and Congolese) people face. For instance, a case could be made for the vitality of phone communications and therefore access to power for households who have few opportunities for income-generating activities and must rely on the support of often distant relatives or connections to sustain themselves. Richard, a Ugandan staff member of the International Rescue Committee in Kampala, said, 'They are living large, and yet they call themselves refugees. There are realities in life that you must adjust to accordingly' (I-129). Embedded in these narratives are implicit and problematic associations of refugee status with poverty.

By failing to recognise the diverse trajectories that bring South Sudanese individuals into the city—and by denying the ongoing material needs that shape their everyday lives—Ugandan

authorities and humanitarian actors systematically withhold recognition of refugees as legitimate urban residents and humanitarian subjects. As a result, many South Sudanese continue to live in precarious relationships of partial inclusion and structured dependence, navigating between the settlement and the city. Even when policy frameworks nominally guarantee equal treatment, these commitments rarely translate into practice. The most openly acknowledged example of this is in education. Officially, refugees are entitled to access primary education in Uganda on an equal basis with citizens, yet non-national pupils are routinely charged higher fees than Ugandan pupils. The LC1 for Ayooze recounted that in 'Arua public primary, which has between 2000 and 3000 pupils … a national pays 150,000 UGX and a refugee is likely to pay 180,000 to 190,000 per term' (I-124). This is in contradiction to the 2006 Refugee Act, which states the following: 'elementary education for which refugees must receive the same treatment as nationals' (29e iii). Not only are these fees discriminatory, but they also impose a substantial burden on refugee households.

Access to education closely informs the migration strategies of South Sudanese households who seek to prioritise education for their children in the pursuit of economic stability and social mobility – as such, the cost and quality of education are a major issue (Lematia, 2022). Humanitarian and developmental actors promote education as a path to economic stability and a means of restoring dignity and securing long-term social mobility in exile. Indeed, parents who do not send their children to school are publicly chastised. However, when families stretch their budgets to secure access to better schools in urban centres, only to encounter discrimination and escalating costs, they are often redirected back toward the settlement, where educational provision is even more limited. Overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, a lack of teachers, and inadequate teaching materials reduce educational standards to a bare minimum, making it difficult for children to thrive. These structural inequalities are not incidental—they entrench social stratification, forcing refugee families to choose between unaffordable but higher-quality urban schooling and under-resourced but accessible education in the settlement. In this way, the city does not offer South Sudanese refugees a straightforward site of opportunity. Instead, it becomes a space where rights are negotiated, and inclusion is always partial and contingent. The unequal application of policy, combined with everyday practices of discrimination, effectively disqualifies refugees from full urban belonging, despite their contributions to the city's economy,

infrastructure, and social life. These dynamics point to a broader politics of governance through neglect, in which legal recognition exists, but its material benefits are withheld, especially from those whose very presence challenges dominant ideas about who cities are for.

Jaksana, a Kakwa from Morobo County in Yei, came to Uganda with his family in 2016. Upon arrival, he and his family registered in Imvepi settlement. Owing to family connections, they are able to reside in the city. In Oli, a densely populated area north of the Central Business District, they live on a small plot of land owned by his uncle, a South Sudanese man who resides elsewhere. Emphasising the challenges of supporting children through school, Jaksana continued, 'The issue of school payments is a very big one. The schools are not fit for children to learn. They go far footing, and school starts late … The Ugandan government allows them to go to school, [but] although it is a government school, you must pay something' (I-125). Caregivers are expected to pay for uniforms, food, and scholastic materials, examination results and sometimes contribute to school maintenance (Mwesiga, 2015). As indicated in Chapter 4, although many South Sudanese children attend government schools, which are supposed to be free under the 1997 Universal Primary Education Policy, there are many 'hidden' costs which stretch the budgets of both South Sudanese and Ugandan households. With minimal income and significant pressure on public services, South Sudanese often withdraw their children from school. Many children do not register and others with outstanding payments are routinely sent home from school by their teachers. These problems only worsen for secondary and tertiary education, rendering them largely inaccessible. A senior staff member for Arua Public Secondary explained that the fees are 'Arua Public Secondary 280,000 UGX per term. When South Sudanese join, it is 400,000 UGX plus' (I-126).[97]

In contrast to settlement contexts, where access to healthcare is limited to facilities operated by humanitarian implementing partners, regardless of a household's financial means, Arua town offers a broader, though still uneven, range of medical options. Many South Sudanese refugees see the city as a place to access higher-quality or more responsive care. Yet this potential is shaped—and often constrained—by ability to pay, the capacity of under-resourced government

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[97] Similar issues are reported in Kampala (Radio Tamazuj, 2023).

facilities, and the fragmented architecture of healthcare provision. Under integrated service provision, district health systems operate alongside aid agencies and international interventions under the leadership of the Ministry of Health. For all service users, regular stockouts and lengthy waiting times undermine access to care via public health facilities. Additionally, staff may not have any relevant qualifications for their duties, creating further safety challenges (see also Komakech *et al.,* 2019; Storer and Pearson, 2019). Recognising the often substandard quality of government-led services, many pursue private treatment. As Arua City's Sanitation Officer put it, 'There is pressure on the existing services that we have, so the majority prefer private healthcare services. Government services easily run out of stock. This has made the majority resort to private care. Many of these private providers are not recognised, and there is mismanagement with no proper reporting or follow-up' (I-117). This dependence on unregulated private providers introduces new vulnerabilities. Not only do patients risk receiving low-quality or unsafe care, but the absence of oversight and follow-up mechanisms further fragments the continuum of care. For South Sudanese, language barriers and prejudicial tropes can result not only in miscommunication with high risks of misdiagnoses and mistreatment but also exposure to abuse. Even international NGO staff, tasked with supporting referral cases from settlements to Arua's urban health system, routinely bypass public facilities in favour of private clinics, effectively reinforcing the withdrawal of state responsibility, undermining the stated aims of integrated health systems.

The everyday realities of South Sudanese engagement with state-led services are incredibly fractured and situationally dependent. The need to self-fund medical treatment in the urban arena (as is often the case in settlements) places immense stress on household incomes as displaced persons regularly report higher healthcare costs than citizens (ACTED *et al.,* 2018a-i). As Jaksana put it, 'There is not enough medication. We are the ones finding the money to help with sickness. Refugees are dying. Many refugees fear to tell the truth, but I do not fear' (I-125).

Figure 10 – South Sudanese market stall traders selling fish in Arua Central Market. Source: Brown, 2022.

City-makers

As will be discussed in the next section, South Sudanese households in Arua are largely sustained by money beyond national territorial boundaries – either via remittances or international donor funds. South Sudanese demand for goods and services including the housing market, make significant contributions to Arua's economy. Many of those with the ability to do so have also established businesses which contribute substantial amounts of money to the local economy through taxes and employment opportunities (Okello and Aluma, 2023). There are two South Sudanese fish markets – one adjacent to the main market in Arua (shown in Figure 10), the other in Oli. Bundles of dried fish are transported from the often-flooded regions of Jonglei to Uganda by the truckload, where it is purchased at a premium, including for sale across the Congolese

border. This also produces opportunities for employment – Ugandan labourers are employed to offload the produce for sale.

Figure 11 - UNHCR tarpaulins used as awning for market traders. Source: Brown, 2022.

The existence of the displacement infrastructure is also an important source of employment and creates other opportunities in the city. Orienting towards the camp, taxi drivers and traders cater to the movements of refugees to and from the city. Drivers and government staff capitalise on price differentials between the rurally located camps and the town to trade in goods such as charcoal as they travel between the two spaces. Urban landowners have responded with keen enthusiasm for securing lucrative contracts to host NGO employees and offices.

The material evidence of the displacement permeates the everyday fabric of the city. UNHCR 'carpets' are repurposed as canopies for market stalls (see Figure 11), while just off the main market road stands Juba Corner — a shop and restaurant offering popular goods from Khartoum and South Sudan. As well as contributing enormously to the economic life of the city,

Figure 12 - South Sudanese Student Association sign in Arua Secondary school. Source: Brown, 2022.

the material and social fabric of the city is also enriched by this cosmopolitan diversity. Independent churches established by South Sudanese people are scattered across neighbourhoods such as Awindiri, Ediofe, Oli, Mvara, Pajulu, and Ociba. The South Sudanese United Students Association plays a prominent role in mobilising young people to perform academically, serving as a point of pride for the headmaster and deputy at Arua Public Secondary School, so much so that the association of SSUSA has installed a signpost in the main courtyard of the school grounds (as can be seen in Figure 12).

Financing urban residence

Uganda's Refugee Act 2006, Section 29, vi, grants refugees the legal right to access employment. While this provision is of considerable significance, the practical realisation of this right is deeply constrained. Unemployment rates across Uganda remain high, particularly in the northern regions (Odyang, 2023), rendering access to gainful employment a widespread challenge, irrespective of citizenship status. However, for refugees, additional barriers persist. Studies indicate that only 23% of employers are aware that refugees possess the legal right to work in Uganda (Loiacono and Vargas, 2019), leading many to exclude refugees from consideration. For instance, despite holding a diploma in social work administration and previous experience as a driver, Jaksana has been unable to secure employment beyond casual labour. He narrated that he had applied to work for organisations operating within West Nile, only to be told that 'refugees cannot have the opportunity to apply' (I-125). Limits to employment are linked, too, to the low transferability of qualifications gained outside Uganda. For example, national identification is a

barrier to employment as a teacher. As a result, South Sudanese people educated outside Uganda can be employed only in assistant positions (Sempebwa, 2023). As a result, refugees are systematically underemployed and experience professional downgrading (UNHCR, 2021). From a more critical perspective, these justifications can be seen as tools of structural suppression, serving to legitimise the extraction of cheap refugee labour while reinforcing social and economic hierarchies that privilege citizens. The RWCII echoed these points: 'As if not enough. You get paid less for work. I have the same paper and the same faculties. If you are South Sudanese, you put your attestation [card], and so it becomes very easy to say [there are] only a few [jobs] for refugees. It is very difficult for us to have these kinds of work … and again, it is the same with payment—50,000 shillings for Ugandans, 40,000 shillings for refugees. [When you complain], the threat is that this is the policy. And yet, even the interviewer cannot even be of your level.' (I-118). This dynamic is not merely one of exclusion, but of active suppression, where legal ambiguity and informal norms are mobilised to restrict refugee access to decent work. These examples highlight widely shared experiences of discrimination which prevent refugees from holding jobs. The consequences of these issues are amplified for South Sudanese people, who often have fewer alternative resources, such as land, to draw upon.

For Jaksana, the only option remaining is small-scale casual work, which can be highly irregular and poorly remunerated. Jaksana continued: 'In the urban area, we struggle to search the street for any kind of labour work to earn a living... you have to go look for where to slash, dig or build. And when they know you are a refugee, they tend to pay less money. You have to accept that' (I-125). His wife, Imena, is a Congolese woman who was first displaced from DRC to South Sudan, where she met Jaksana. Since witnessing extreme acts of violence in DRC, she has suffered from a nervous condition which leaves her hands trembling. In 2016, they fled South Sudan for Uganda. She plaits hair from a nearby roadside hairdressing point. A portion of the shillings she earns goes to securing her spot in the make-shift salon; the rest is used to supplement their household income. Others supplement their income through small-scale produce – for example, 'our women are making maize pancakes, each one sells for about 100 UGX' (F-1). Women also participate in informal and irregular craft activities – selling milaya and household place mats – often targeting South Sudanese customers in the diaspora.

The limited and poorly remunerated opportunities in the urban arena mean that households often rely on external sources of income. Many rely on incomes from precariously employed relatives in South Sudan. The localised analysis conducted by indicated that 32.95% of non-citizen households in Arua receive the majority of their household income via remittances from relatives in and out of the country (VNG International, 2024, p. 61). Returning to the comments of INGO staff in Kampala (see Chapter 2) - 'refugees in town all have money' (I-129) – such comments reflect assumptions that South Sudanese households in town are linked to relatives abroad who regularly send income from Canada, the US and Australia, among other places with sizeable South Sudanese diaspora populations. While remittances do play a role in some households, these households are often densely populated by extended kin networks who depend on this income to support educational needs or secure essential medical care. Ultimately, reliance on singular sources of informal income can be highly disruptive. Even those whose relatives have formal jobs face irregular payments. Those with 'responsible persons' with government jobs back in South Sudan decried the effects of the depreciation of the South Sudanese pound (Houreld, 2017), prolonged delays to payments (Machol, 2022), and the substantial number of family members in their care. As will be discussed in the next two sections of this chapter, others reported that the death, ill health, or absence of their key source of financial support had left them in desperate need. All this amounts to households which are highly susceptible to financial shocks.

A significant proportion of households, specifically 55.11%, continue to depend on rations provided by the refugee camp or the cash generated through the sale of these rations (VNG International, 2024, p. 61). This assistance has played a crucial role in helping households meet their basic needs within the city. However, the reliability of this support has become increasingly uncertain due to a reduction in ration supplies, rising costs, and the lack of alternative income sources. It is important to note that these monthly rations represent a highly limited form of assistance, and any delays in distribution or alterations to the ration amounts can destabilise the already fragile financial balance of these households. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Uganda implemented a nationwide lockdown, with control over movements. Transport bans rendered the GFA rations that many relied on suddenly inaccessible (The Independent, 2020). The movement restrictions prevented those in the urban area from

leaving the city to travel to the camp. As a result, they were unable to attend the distribution days. A pastor of a large church in Ociba, a north-eastern area of Arua, explained that they requested special accommodation to allow them to distribute the rations in the city. 'We went to OPM to organise to distribute money here, and even then, they did not allow people to. They told us there were no urban refugees here, preventing us from forming an organisation or group' (I-149). The head of the South Sudanese Refugee Association (SSURA) in Arua was similarly informed that if any private individual felt like helping, they could take their own car and facilitate this. But again, material facilitation of this amounted to a signed travel permit (I-150). These examples demonstrate how the formal stipulation that urban refugees are not recognised outside of Kampala is used to block attempts at adaptation and collective mobilisation.[98]

An additional and thinly disguised source of income support also came through romantic relationships. Though these were not explicitly commercialised, romantic entanglements were considered a way to expand one's networks and therefore secure additional income sources. Young people – including underage adolescents – sometimes relied on relationships with older partners to secure some form of financial freedom. Several female interlocutors described relying on 'boyfriends' not only for emotional and romantic fulfilment, but also as a way to supplement household budgets, particularly in cases where their husbands were based in South Sudan or other locations.[99] Unsurprisingly, rumours of explicitly transactional engagements also circulated. Several women based in the camp were known to regularly travel to Bibia in Arua from the camp to engage in sex work. These activities were interpreted both as evidence of female-headed households adopting survival strategies and as indicators of perceived moral decline.[100] Similarly, younger men were reported to engage in comparable forms of sexual and material exchange with older, wealthier women who had access to financial resources. This is not to negate the

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[98] This echoed the concerns of international parties advocating for recognition. One of them reported that the RDO had told her they would have a greater likelihood of success with their advocacy if they dropped the reference to refugees and referred to migrants instead.
[99] Recognizing that material exchange and gifts form a constitutive part of relational obligations that are not pre-determined as financial transactions. This is distinct from the more commercial, clientelistic relationships of sex work (Hunter, 2002).
[100] For an in-depth literature review regarding women's engagement in transactional sex in humanitarian contexts see Formson and Hilhorst (2016).

emotional or sexual dimensions of such relationships; indeed, one interlocutor whose husband remained in South Sudan frequently articulated her profound sense of loneliness and yearning for romantic connection. Rather, this highlights the complex and often underacknowledged interplay between intimacy and economic survival within precarious settings.

Amidst rising living costs and diminishing income sources, many individuals continue to live in conditions of chronic insecurity. South Sudanese households are increasingly found in the peripheral areas of the city, where rents are cheaper. As rents increase, many experience repeat relocations. Faced with such challenges, parents and caregivers often leave children within the town and go elsewhere to look for work, leaving older children responsible for younger ones. The issue of instability is pervasive and is considered particularly damaging to the future prospects of children. As one secondary school teacher narrated, 'The parents do not communicate with the students on time... they are allowed to manage the money for their welfare, drinking and social activities. They send money for this child to manage, so they are exposed to money at an early stage. I have observed that some even have businesses. They can even jump over the fence [of the school] ... that destabilises them' (I-126). These accounts highlight the vulnerabilities that result from the pursuit of 'self-reliance'.

One of the main ways that refugee populations are visibilised in Arua is through the monthly circularity of movements to and from the settlements. As well as the 55.11% of households in Arua who cite their main source of income as coming from the settlement infrastructure, many more supplement their household budgets with these rations. Tracing these movements became a mainstay of my own research as I pursued close empirical observation of the ways that South Sudanese people in Arua City remained in close connection with the settlement infrastructure. On a monthly cycle, each settlement will designate a set number of days for the residents of each zone to receive their allocated rations. The schedule is a vital piece of information for those in the city who rely on their social networks to plan their travel to the settlement. The schedules are often shared in the first week of the month on WhatsApp groups to current and former members of Refugee Welfare Committees and general cash and food assistance volunteers.

Public taxi provides the most affordable mode of transport to the settlement. The journey from one of the taxi parks within the city (for example, situated to the north of the town on the road

branching to Koboko) to Tika zone in 2023 cost 20,000 UGX each way. Others cram themselves on motorcycles. One young man, delegated to collect his household's ration, borrowed the motorbike he hired from a Ugandan, for a fee, to work as an unregulated boda boda rider in town, to travel from Arua to the settlement. Inviting friends who were also due to attend the distribution day, he offered a lift to three others who sat together on the two-hour journey from town to Tika, and again on the way back (O-2).

Figure 13 - Traders opposite the FDP preparing their stalls for the day's trade. Source: Brown, 2022.

Many people who travel aim to arrive at the FDP early in the morning. This ensures they will be among the first in the queue, and - assuming their fellow passengers have the same mindset - will allow them to leave the settlement with enough time to mitigate the risk of being caught out by the dangers of travelling in certain areas after dark. Many miss school to attend the distributions, which invariably happen on weekdays; others leave young children in town with friends or older
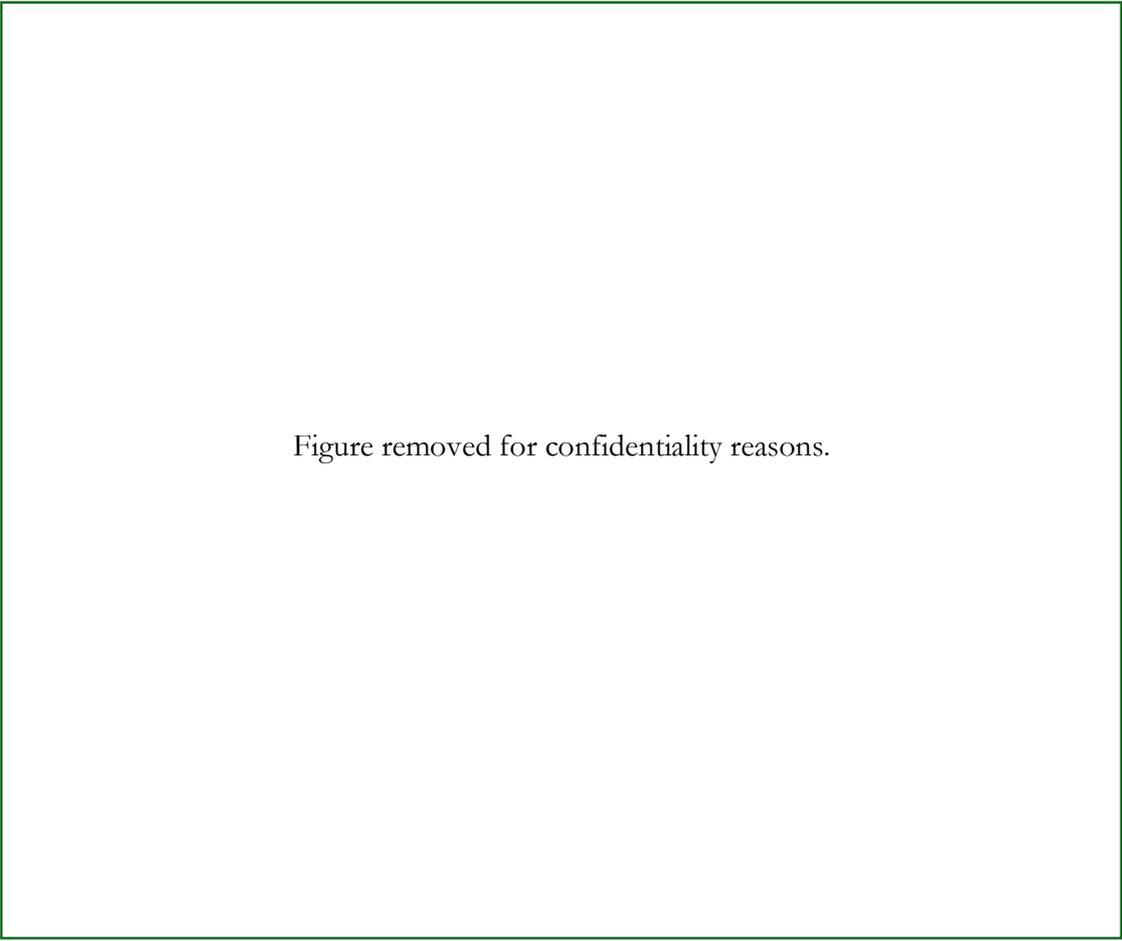
Figure removed for confidentiality reasons.

Figure 14 - People wait in congested lines to access the distribution point. Source: Brown, 2022.

siblings. On distribution days, there is a lot of activity around the centres: as indicated in Figure 13, small-scale restaurants offer an opportunity to take tea, snacks or meals on the go. In anticipation of the temporary boost to people's incomes, traders offer various wares and food items. Alongside the queues of people waiting to enter the fenced-off distribution centre, traders spread their clothes on tarpaulin as seen in Figure 14. The concentration around the zone also offers an opportunity for socialisation. The queues outside the FDP form congested lines around the edges of the wire fence lining the distribution point. Volunteers, mainly young men from the zone, work to organise the lines, to point people in the right direction, as translators, distributors, and, occasionally, to intervene in disputes on behalf of other refuges. In theory, the distribution should commence from 10 am. In practice, the cash mechanism was often delayed by several hours. The Postbank vehicle carrying the money for cash-based transfers, escorted by armed security, sometimes broke down on the way to the distribution point (O-2).

Figure 15 - Inside the FDP warehouse where in-kind rations are calculated, weighed and distributed. Source: Brown, 2022.

After verifying their details with the staff operating the few computers provided to process refugee documents, the household representative would proceed to collect their allocated ration, either as food (see Figure 15) or cash, which would be distributed from the Postbank vehicle. At other times, the head of the household (the nominated person for ration collection) would sit for hours on crowded wooden benches waiting for their case to be addressed by the UNHCR litigation team. After collection, people would use their newly acquired resources to make essential purchases, to clear debts, and eventually, return to their vehicles. When ready for departure, vehicles laden with the in-kind rations collected by passengers would begin the journey back to the city (see Figure 16).
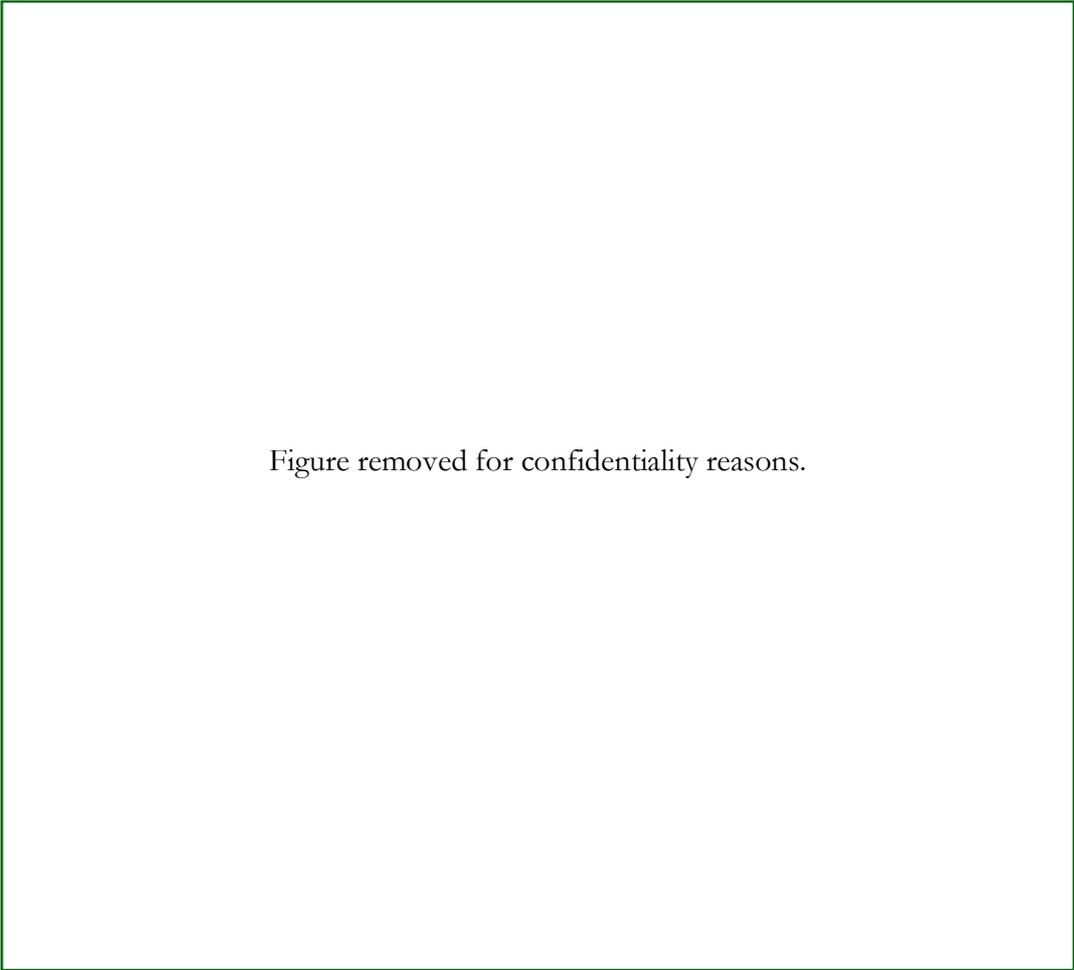
Figure removed for confidentiality reasons.

Figure 16 - Public taxis line the main road through block 2, where Tika FDP is based. Source: Brown, 2022.

Not all of the households registered in the settlement have the financial incentive to attend the distribution. With a journey cost of at least 40,000 UGX, households of just two members will lose money if they come to collect their ration. As this suggests, these calculations change as the rations change. Before UNHCR shifted Congolese refugee further inland, several households explained that they had also registered in Congo. Crossing the border to Aru was relatively straightforward and the refugee rations in Congo were $10 per household member. For those registered in Arua, this offered a much better rate of return than registration in Uganda. These same households gave two reasons not to live in DRC full-time – firstly, the risk of insecurity and secondly, the French education system. Eventually, when the distribution was moved further inland, extending the journey away from the border along insecure roads, they gave up on this strategy (I-181). These expressions of regional mobility, evidenced here through observation and

interviews, are propelled by the bureaucratic architecture of humanitarian support. However tenuous the support from the camp may be, it provides welcome relief in the monetised context of the city.

Verification process: perpetuating urban precarity

Policies designed to define refugee status and target those deemed 'most in need' can, paradoxically, penalise those whose needs are greatest but whose lives fall outside of bureaucratically legible norms. To maintain their refugee status and enable their continued access to food distribution in the settlements, refugees in Uganda have been subject to several profiling exercises to re-legitimate their bureaucratic status.[101] Ostensibly, this form of data collection is to inform programming and to ensure that those registering are genuinely those in need. This reflects documented reports of fraud – only 75.5% of the 1.4 million registered persons were re-registered in 2018 (OPM and UNHCR, 2018). The 2021-2022 individual profiling exercise saw a 17% reduction in the documented population (UNHCR, 2023c, p. 4).

These time-bound activities require refugees to attend in person to have their details confirmed and updated where necessary. If a household failed to attend, they would be removed from the system and so would find that their identity documents no longer work in the settlement, thus denying them access to the monthly ration distributions. Verification exercises serve as a key mechanism through which the humanitarian infrastructure reasserts its authority over city residents, including displaced populations living outside designated refugee settlements. While framed as a technical procedure aimed at improving aid delivery, verification is deeply political. It reflects and reinforces broader logics of categorisation and surveillance within humanitarian governance. The following case examines the effects of the 2022 profiling exercises, which was ongoing at the start of my in-person data collection. This profiling took on extra significance, forming the basis for the prioritisation exercise implemented in 2023 (see Chapter 8).

Mary lives in a one-room brick shelter with six children and her adolescent brother in a cosmopolitan suburb in the southwest of the city. She rented the iron-roof structure from her

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[101] Formally known as Individual Profiling Exercises.

Ugandan landlord, who lived in a neighbouring house on the same plot of land. To pay for rent, food, water and airtime, Mary would travel to the settlement to receive their ration on a monthly basis. She would take a public taxi costing 20,000 UGX to travel the 61 km to the food distribution point in Siripi, another zone in Rhino camp. At the FDP, she would receive 220,000 UGX for her registered household of ten people.[102] She would then take a public taxi costing 20,000 UGX for her return journey. Upon return, she would give 30,000 UGX to her landlord. The remaining balance was 150,000 UGX (I-55).

When it came to the time for her household to be verified, Mary could not afford the additional trip to the settlement. Ariwa was where the registration for Siripi zone was taking place, where they had been registered under Simbili within Rhino settlement. Because they had failed to reregister, Mary's household was deactivated, and so they were no longer entitled to receive monthly distributions. By August 2023, when I met Mary, they had missed two months of distribution – they had no other sources of income. As Mary's case demonstrates, the conditions of urban residence are precarious. Contrary to assumptions that South Sudanese households in the city are those with the wealth to be there, the need to make ends meet continues beyond the confines of the settlement. None of the children under Mary's care were attending school. Her Ugandan landlady, recognising their financial condition, would sometimes take pity on the children and bring fruits and other food to their home. Moreover, because Mary's household had been deactivated, a paralegal employed by NRC explained that there was nothing they could do. Caseloads were mounting, and refugee identification was relied on as one way to filter cases.

The denial of the material conditions facing South Sudanese households and of the underlying structures that often drive people to the city performs an erasure. The strategic choice to position oneself in the city, despite immense financial precarity, reflects constrained agency that comes at a cost. These tensions are particularly acute in urban areas, where the realities of displacement and poverty are often obscured by prevailing assumptions about the opportunities afforded by city life. Yet the precariousness of urban displacement is poorly captured in both

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[102] Her husband and his sister, who had left in 2021 and had not been in communication since, were the two additional household members.

policy and scholarly literature.[103] While it is true that, for some, urban residence may provide opportunities that are out of reach in the camp, such as informal employment or social networks, this potential is not universally realised. For many, urban living intensifies forms of monetary poverty, as displaced households face not only high living costs but also fragmented and stratified access to social protection. In such contexts, the absence of formal entitlements, coupled with limited visibility within aid systems, compounds vulnerability rather than alleviating it.

Financial contingency

As described by Kampala-based WFP staff members, the self-reliance 'journey' projects a linear timeline, 'from arrival to self-reliance, stability, and the ability to live freely in the country' (I-137). Although self-reliance in this context is minimally defined as the ability to live without institutional humanitarian material/financial support, in its idealised form it is defined as 'the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity' (UNHCR, 2005, p. 1). What is lost in translation, in both the minimalist and idealised form, are the often finite temporalities of these 'sustainable' material horizons. Through an extended case, this section traces these uneven trajectories. It argues that even those who seem relatively well-off can face fundamental challenges in meeting their essential needs. What is of particular relevance here is the changeability of individual and collective prospects for economic independence and the silence of discourses of 'self-reliance' concerning disjuncture and diversions from this sequential path to stability.

In 2022, Amara and her family lived in a sizeable, rented home on an elevation at the eastern edge of the Central Business District in Arua City. They had relocated to Arua from Yei in 2016. Amara was married to a senior-ranking officer of the South Sudanese military, who provided for their financial needs. He remained in South Sudan. In Arua, Amara was responsible for thirteen

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[103] Relatedly, urban sociologist David Satterthwaite (2004) convincingly argues that dominant approaches to poverty measurement significantly underestimate the extent of urban deprivation for both citizen and non-citizen populations. This is largely due to the use of unrealistically low poverty lines and metrics that fail to account for the compounded vulnerabilities faced by residents in informal or underserved urban settings.

other household members – eleven of whom were intermittently attending school. In her care were her own biological children, several of her stepchildren, grandchildren, her orphaned younger brother, and a series of young adults who temporarily stayed in the home. In their compound, English and Juba Arabic echoed through the house. The youngest household member toddled around, demanding joyful attention from more-than-willing household members. Teenage girls took turns cooking the evening meals – this was narrated as a slow process of teaching essential skills for marriage. A rotating menu of sauces – beans and sukuma wiki – was served alongside posho. They took tea in the morning, sometimes porridge.

The large, dilapidated residence took centre stage in the compound. To the right, there was a small structure hosting a pit latrine. Avocado and mango trees around the fringes of the property provided welcome seasonal dietary diversity. Their landlord forbade them from taking from the small patch of crops growing at the back of the compound. Clothes, which were hung on the perimeter fence to dry after being washed, were often stolen. The run-down fencing of the compound meant it could be accessed from many angles. Neighbours could enter and pass through their compound from either side, and livestock frequently roamed on the bare soil surrounding the house. The large water butt, situated inside the internal gate, was a recurrent source of sickness. A water tap connected to the Northern Umbrella of Water and Sanitation utility association leaked and was periodically locked when unpaid bills accumulated.

Bedbug-riddled mattresses lay in the concrete courtyard. The gates to the courtyard were locked at night - a preventative measure against thieves. Inside, leather sofas, a large dresser, and wooden coffee tables adorned the sitting room. Several parts of the sofa covers had worn away, exposing the foam material underneath. Though a fridge sat in the living room, it was often switched off due to the cost of electricity. Large holes punctured the ceiling, and rats roamed the floor. A portrait of Amara's husband, in his military uniform, looked on resolutely over the open doorway leading to the main bedrooms. The bedrooms were densely occupied.

Money – who held it and its appropriate use – was a recurrent source of tension in the household. Though the children were all in school, they would regularly be sent home, 'chased', because of their unpaid school fees. In late 2017, the family registered in the settlement. In pursuit of supplementary income, Amara pursued various business activities, betting school fees

on the purported profits she could make. Eventually, her attempts brought her into conflict with a South Sudanese community association in Arua and, individuals to whom she was indebted. Eventually, one irritated investor came to collect the fridge as partial compensation for Amara's unpaid debts.

After more than two years in the home, attempts by the landlord to increase the cost of rental from 700,000 to 800,000 UGX prompted a contested search for a new home. The family debated where they wanted to be – close to town, in limited living quarters, or in a more spacious compound which might afford the household members a modicum of privacy. Eventually, they paid an upfront deposit and relocated to a shared compound much further West of the Central Business District. The new tenancy was overseen by several adult siblings from a Lugbara family who held well-established positions in Kampala and in Arua City government. In the compound there were four separate rental units which were rented out at various prices depending on the size of the house and the nationality of the tenants. With the move came new schools, new neighbours, and a search for reliable and affordable boda drivers.

After six months, a medical emergency called half of the family home. Amara's husband was gravely ill. Though Amara's husband has since recovered, he is unable to return to work and the family remain in Juba. The remaining children returned to South Sudan six months later, leaving behind several months of unpaid rent. The house they lived in in Arua is now occupied by another South Sudanese family. The furniture Amara left remains locked in one of the smaller single room houses in the compound. Over a year later, Amara continued to suggest she would eventually return to clear the debt and collect her furniture.

This case, centred around a military family of relative affluence, highlights the central flaw in self-reliance narratives, which assume both the possibility of economic independence and that can be interminably sustained. In many ways, the socio-economic positioning of Amara and her family affirms common narratives about South Sudanese people, who are registered as refugees but reside in sizeable houses in town. In others, it highlights the immense precarity faced even by military wives. Even for those living in large, permanent housing, their rent is often not paid, children may be recurrently sent home from school, and meals are skipped. Though the South Sudanese currency had previously carried significant purchasing power relative to the Ugandan

shilling, its rapid devaluation has had a significant effect on households relying on income sources in South Sudan (Francis and Khanyile, 2015). With prolonged conflict and dire economic circumstances, even those relying on relatively secure government contracts have found their financial security steadily eroded. One interviewee a man in his mid-40s, a major in the army, reported that his monthly salary could not even buy two weeks' worth of food for his family who lived in RCS (I-128). Others have never afforded the luxuries South Sudanese people are commonly associated with, yet they pay the price of being associated with perceived wealth. This brief account highlights the changeable positions of precariously situated urban residents, whereby their ability to pursue social mobility is in flux in accordance with individual, household, local, national, and international circumstances. The temporal horizons of wealth can be incredibly precarious. As Storer noted (2024, p. 7), South Sudanese women, often with many children in their care, grappled with uncertainty as external resources became increasingly unreliable, prompting many to turn towards the settlement.

Ultimately South Sudanese residents of Arua represent a highly diverse population, dynamically situated in volatile economic contexts – as a result the conditions of their urban experiences are highly financially contingent. Okello's family now reside in Rhino camp, but prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, he transferred his family to Arua so that his children could attend better quality schools. The onset of the national lockdown disrupted these plans - as his employment in the camp stopped, and the costs of urban residence became too onerous (I-118). Speaking at a prayer event in Arua in 2023, a woman described the incessant, highly gendered, and relational challenges they face in managing stretched household budgets. This produces emotional and relational strain through spatially dispersed relations of dependency. She narrated, 'South Sudanese women are really suffering. Here, we have five husbands. The first is the headteacher. We must go, as women, and beg the headteacher to let him understand the situation and allow the children to stay in school. In the market, when there is no food at home, we must do the same with the trader, such that we can eat. The same with the doctor, when people at home are sick. The same again, with the landlord, such that we can remain in the house. And then with all

of these we must approach our real husbands and ask them to send the money' (O-7).[104] As will be examined in more detail in the next chapter, a key consideration of service use was the perceived willingness of education, healthcare providers, and landlords to tolerate extended payment timelines. Mary detailed how the school she sends her children to is, to her, ok: 'They can study for the whole year without paying their school fees, and their teachers won't send them home because their school is quite different from the rest of the schools in Arua... they only call the parents and talk to them' (I-65).[105]

Through the above accounts, it becomes clear that these survival infrastructures are not limited to co-national affiliations. A given household may mobilise support from established kin networks and local actors to mediate temporary challenges in income, including church congregations, Ugandan landlords, neighbours, traders, and friends. Reflecting the dense interdependencies that permeate the social, cultural, and political landscape, these contingent connections permeate the cash economies that undergird urban life: 'I went to meet the headmaster and education authorities of Oasis Nursery and Primary School, because my children were sent home because of school fees. I went to plead with the administration to keep my children at school as I look for the money. The headmaster was understanding and gave me a grace period to look for the money so as to repay.' (I-84). In another example, given by a Ugandan teacher at a secondary school, 'Two years ago, there was a student who was completely stranded; he was evicted, so the teacher had to sacrifice to take care of them for three months. They have now left' (I-126).

Amidst financial precarity, the rental home also becomes a key site for adaptation. For many, shared accommodation is the first access point in the city, offering a foothold that is both material and relational. In this context, the home is reconfigured as a form of community infrastructure—a space where practices of mutuality, reciprocity, and everyday care become

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[104] Writing on International Women's Day celebrations in Obongi town in 2014, Georgina Pearson noted that Hassan Fungaroo, MP of Obongi, opened his speech by saying 'If women in Uganda have two problems, women in Moyo District have four. And if women in Moyo District have four problems, women in Obongi have eight' (see Pearson, 2015, p. 88). The similarities between these pleas to attend to the gendered dimensions of power and poverty are quite striking.
[105] I do not want to suggest women are only tireless advocates. Many were also testing the limits of their relatively unsupervised freedoms.

essential to establishing and sustaining life beyond the settlement. As one woman in her late thirties explained, 'Our people live by helping.' She described how she had been hosting a young man for over a year. At nineteen years of age, he had found himself back in the city after a failed attempt to register across the border in a Congolese refugee settlement, hoping to receive the relatively more valuable monthly ration of 10 USD per month. She later commented, 'For these households who are family size one, it is really difficult' (I-36). Such accounts reveal how acts of care and cohabitation are not simply expressions of generosity but responses to the structural violence of the humanitarian system, where access to resources is tightly governed by registration status, household size, and geographic location. These decisions—about who to host, how long, and under what terms—are often made in dynamic negotiation with the constraints of refugee policy and the rhythms of aid distribution. In this way, humanitarian infrastructure becomes entangled with the intimate politics of the home, shaping not only survival strategies but also the terms of social belonging and obligation. These everyday exchanges form the foundation of an alternative infrastructure of support, emerging from below in response to the failures and exclusions of formal systems. They are central to understanding how displaced populations remake urban life through relational labour, improvisation, and care under constraint.

The realities of self-reliance are highly stratified and dependent on spatially diverse networks of support. In many cases, homes were densely and fluidly occupied. Drivers of these forms of social circulation included administrative tasks, a lack of space in their former location, disputes and being in transit. These processes produce the home as a generative space of connection. I do not wish to romanticise the home. Those living within a home face unequal, multi-scalar, and intersecting relations of power. Amara gave several young men shared occupancy of one of the outer rooms of the house in exchange for their contributions to the household. While she allowed them access to the security and education services of the city, the implied contract was that they could be relied upon to provide support and security when needed. As illuminated in Lipton's study of family life in Sierra Leone for young people, 'a roof over their head was conditional on either contributing money (if they had an external income) or working "for" the house' (2017, p. 66).

However, as these examples indicate, they also function as creative spaces of reconfiguration. This emerged particularly prominently for women who were managing their homes in the

physical absence of their husbands and were often engaging in highly gendered renegotiations of their domestic lives. In several cases, women used their marital isolation to pursue their own desires. One narrated that she had registered in the settlement without her husband's knowledge and was using the money to further her education with the goal of being able to open her own business and obtain financial independence. She had registered in the settlement in 2017 when her husband was sick and so was temporarily unable to send money to support the family in Arua. They spent twenty-seven days in the settlement, including the registration period. She noted that if her husband knew she was receiving money from the settlement, he would insist that the money be used for something else (I-38). Another explained how she was squeezing the school fees and the other money that is sent by her husband to buy household goods that enhanced her material comfort in hidden ways, including purchasing weight gain supplements.

Many women, aware that their desires might be disregarded, strategically mobilised the unpredictable and affectively charged needs of children, such as emergency medical bills, school-related expenses, or additional food costs, to make emotive requests for money. These appeals were often framed within the traditional responsibility structures of extended kin, but also served to create room for manoeuvre within urban life. In one particularly striking case, a woman who was caring for multiple children explained how she had built a small loan business by requesting financial support from the children's distant relatives, often exaggerating their needs. Given that she is the only one caring for these children within the region, the relatives do not know whether she is telling the truth (I-38). In these moments, the home becomes a site not only of survival but of strategic negotiation, where gendered power, humanitarian resources, and kinship obligations intersect in ways that allow for subtle acts of agency, accumulation, and resistance.

Survival infrastructures

This chapter has argued that in this fragmented space, South Sudanese people seek to construct spaces of survival in the city. South Sudanese residents of Arua are often embedded in rich relational networks over extended and flexible spatial arrangements. In situations of intense precarity, they are located in the city, connected to the settlement and in various ways to South Sudan. These highly heterogeneous webs are often in flux, and though they provide a remarkable capacity for adaptivity, they are replete with problems. As a result, the lives of refugees revolve as much around the spatialised bureaucratic infrastructures of material support as on fluid networks

produced with and through the cash economy, proximate neighbours, and extended kin-based networks. Guma *et al.* (2023, p. 290) observe that 'Nairobi's residents are not waiting for the grand solutions to constitute urban spaces'. The same observation can be applied to Arua. South Sudanese denizens of the city, alongside Ugandan and other inhabitants of the city, situate themselves in flexible socio-material relations, drawing on a range of skills and strategies to sustain life in the city. As one woman narrated to me about her and her South Sudanese neighbours in Arua: 'We share among ourselves. We wash away the stress… Without food, rent, school fees… If there is someone sick in the hospital, we all go to visit. Some women are staying alone with the children, and they are struggling. So, we take what we have and divide it among the children little by little' (I-172). At the heart of these infrastructures are interdependencies produced across various social relations. These survival infrastructures often play out based on proximity and stretched kinship lines.

These relations do not amount to wide-scale mobilisations of social support, nor do they lead to sweeping changes. They are a form of 'dissent and repair' social mobilisation (Wilson and Jonas, 2021). Building on Simone's notion of people as infrastructure, I am concerned here not with large-scale resistance but the 'more diffuse but no less concrete ways in which diverse urban actors assemble' (2004a, p. 12). These interventions provide a helpful lens for examining the dense social networks South Sudanese people construct to navigate the city. Diverse relations of mutuality become critical survival infrastructures hinging on social adaptability, moralised social conduct, and indirect resistance. The goal is 'not to implement dramatically new kinds of social relations' which would risk destabilisation; rather, it 'is to fix life's fractures, afflictions, and hermeneutic derogations' (Wilson and Jonas, 2021, p. 3). These relations are often constructed with Ugandans. For example, teachers who sometimes let South Sudanese students sit for their exams as Ugandans, avoiding additional charges. These decisions rest on high levels of discretion from people in positions of relative power.

Notions of reliance and reciprocity are oriented through relationships in ways that fracture straightforward monetisation. They point to the work of moral and social obligations as they coexist alongside financial pressures and demands. One Ugandan landlord noted, 'There are cases where a family member from the Sudanese family falls sick, and since sometimes the head delays sending money, I normally take the person for medication and then request half… You

know life is not easy, so it is very important to understand your Tenants and help where necessary' (I-24). Another illustrative example of this is the social capital that individual refugees will mobilise through their 'friendships' with the field-based staff of international institutions – including, for example, UNHCR and WFP. Training workshops facilitate surprisingly rich connections between regular attendees and staff, which can be called on later. At times, agency staff have put themselves out of pocket, seeking to help in an ad hoc personalised way. One informant reported being given 200,000 UGX by a UNHCR staff member in the wake of the Tika violence (I-132).

While policymakers often assume that intra-regional movement entails minimal cultural adjustment—on the basis that migrants and refugees are living among 'kith and kin' across colonial-era borders—such assumptions rely on essentialised readings of community as coherent and morally unified. As anthropologists have long argued (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Allen, 1997), without attending to the historical, political, and affective complexities of interdependency, these framings risk either pathologising or romanticising market dynamics (Harrison, 2020). Ideas of reciprocity and shared struggle do not exist in isolation but instead interface dynamically with processes of differentiation, boundary-making, and accumulation. Nyamnjoh reminds us that 'being an insider or an outsider is always work in progress, is permanently subject to renegotiation and is best understood as relational and situational' (2013, p. 654). The question of who is included and excluded from practices of solidarity provides important grounds for rethinking how we reframe interdependency.

Any analysis of a given moral economy must account for the political projects and material conditions that shape it (Wiegratz *et al.,* 2024). In contexts marked by institutional neglect and structural violence, community interdependencies come under increasing pressure, often producing intensified moral scrutiny over those perceived to be violating locally defined norms of contribution, obligation, or restraint. These concerns frequently crystallise around the domestic sphere, where the regulation of behaviour within households becomes a focal point of community governance in the absence of reliable state support. In such settings, the moral and affective dimensions of solidarity become essential to understanding how people navigate uncertainty and manage threats (Porter, 2020; Stoler, 2007).

Integration, assimilation, and solidarity—concepts often central to policy discourse—are not neutral processes. They are shaped by powerful moral imaginaries, which are gendered, racialised, and classed, and which carry implicit logics of worth, productivity, and entitlement. As will be explored further in the next chapter, class politics intimately shape South Sudanese experiences of urban life in Arua. Wealthier mobile groups experience and move through this city differently from the poor. As Sanyal argues, the substantive rights of the urban poor are routinely eroded, as 'the bourgeois and rich … are empowered to exercise greater control and entitlement over the city and its policies' (2015, p. 640). In this context, we must interrogate how ideas of solidarity and social cohesion are mobilised—and for whom—within a city structured by inequality and selective inclusion.

Conclusion

The material conditions of the city are challenging for refugees who face high costs and limited access to income-generating activities. At a minimum, households must find a way to afford shelter, food, and water. For the most economically vulnerable, in the city context, with no access to farmable land and with higher expenses such as rent, the bureaucratic entitlement to monthly support afforded by refugee status remains essential. Though much as in the camp, South Sudanese populations are diverse and reflect various class statuses, in the urban environs, it cannot be assumed that all are 'self-reliant'. Having relocated to Arua City as a pragmatic negotiation of resources, the urban poor eke out space in the urban arena whilst remaining within reach of the settlement and its infrastructures of support.

Drawing on diverse examples, this chapter has shown that South Sudanese people are differentially embedded in the survival strategies which underpin the cash economy of Arua. The chapter recasts the city as a space of constant negotiation, embroiled in far-flung networks of relations and movement or 'survival infrastructures' that produce the city space. In Arua, 'residents pursue ways of collaborating with people often very different from themselves, operating in different parts of the city, and with whom they work out highly particularized relationships and ways of dealing with each other' (Simone, 2004a, p. 5). It is only through close readings of the policies and governance structures in context that we understand how and why these relational infrastructures become so important.

Chapter 6: Discursive Currency

This chapter asks what is at stake as city officials turn towards the abstracted figure of the refugee. It stresses the dissonance between narratives of inclusion and the material realities of exclusion, exposing the limits of a policy apparatus that treats refugees as instruments of development optics rather than as rights-bearing urban residents. Disconnected from the everyday experiences of non-citizen populations, technocrats and politicians seek to enumerate heterogenous populations, reasserting the well-worn path of bureaucratic simplification and transforming 'refugees' into a currency through which they assert claims over financial resources.

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how the spatialised segregation of refugee settlements limits the scope for formal interventions in Arua City. It highlighted how non-citizens, constrained by differential rights, are often disadvantaged within the local economy, even as their presence creates new opportunities for Ugandan accumulation. Despite these constraints, the nearly 24,000 refugees residing in Arua make substantial contributions to the city's economy and are highly visible in its material and commercial landscape. Building on Chapter 3, which argued that Arua's flexible urban fabric reflects a longer history of adaptation and negotiated inclusion, Chapter 5 documented how these continue to unfold largely in the absence of formal state intervention. In recent years, however, this implicit inclusion has begun to shift. City-level politicians and bureaucrats have increasingly sought recognition for Arua's inclusivity, reframing long-standing informal coexistence as a deliberate and strategic embrace of refugee populations. This chapter asks: What is at stake in this emerging turn toward formalised refugee inclusion? Arua's infrastructural development has long been shaped by the limited investments of both colonial and post-colonial regimes. Outside the core administrative zone, as argued in Chapter 3, much of the urban environment has been built through the everyday practices and dynamic contributions of its residents, regardless of their legal status. This context raises critical questions about the nature of inclusion: who defines it, who benefits from its formalisation, and what forms of exclusion or surveillance might accompany it?

This chapter opens with a discussion of Arua's history, embedded in minimal investments in infrastructure and the adaptive, innovative forms of self-development that emerge in the conspicuous absence of formal interventionism and infrastructure investment. Though the

history of Arua is often told as a history of trade, I seek here to emphasise the infrastructures of people that build out the city, its capacities and resources, enrolling state, non-state, citizen, non-citizen, formal and informal actants in these rhythms. City bureaucrats, cognisant of the opportunities presented by their acceptance of these 'surplus' populations, increasingly mobilise the presence of 'refugees' in their promotion of material developments of the newly monikered city. Under this framework, the national framework, as it pertains to 'refugees', fails to acknowledge the 'burden' of surplus populations on city resources. Under this logic, the abstract figure of the refugee motivates state enthusiasm for managing these pressures. Although the city government increasingly gestures toward state-led development, these dynamics echo long-standing patterns of tokenistic representation and financialised inclusion. As indicated in Chapter 2, bureaucrats in the city are preoccupied with counting refugees as a way to justify their claims over resources. Just as the central government has instrumentalised international humanitarian causes for patronage and image management, so too do city-level actors reproduce the refugee figure as a form of soft currency—a means of asserting authority and legitimacy within an expanded governance arena. The final part of the chapter turns towards issues of representation. In the clamour for recognition, South Sudanese and Congolese people are conspicuously absent.

Urbanisation and movement

As indicated in Chapter 3, much of Arua's growth has been the piecemeal and bottom-up production of its residents. This is made most apparent by the scale of urban sprawl beyond the former boundaries of the municipality. This is captured well by Abudu *et al.* (2019), who map the enormous growth in the built environment between 2001 and 2016. [106] Following the colonial boundaries of the township, the former municipality of Arua was limited to 10 km². The rapid spread of the urban environment far superseded this administrative boundary. The formerly rural surrounds of Arua municipality have been reshaped, largely by clan landowners who have repurposed their holdings for use as rental properties, for service providers and sale. Owing to the limited administrative capacity of the municipality, the residential expanse of the city grew far beyond the bounds of municipal governance, resulting in minimal oversight. As the former physical planner for Arua municipality described, though the latest plan for the municipality

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[106] See Abudu *et al.,* (2019 p. 320) for a temporal map showing urbanisation of the study area from 2001 to 2016.

expanded the scope of planning to 30 km², it could not be mobilised as it extended far beyond the municipal government's jurisdiction. Moreover, it was only the Physical Planning Act 2010 that formally incorporated rural areas into the 'planning area' and subject them to governmental intervention regarding planning and construction.

While Arua has grown drastically amidst the increased stability of the last two decades, the fabric of the city has long been dynamically formed by its residents, cross-border trade, and contested notions of belonging. The colonial layout of the central municipal space and preferential treatment of particular communities across different parts of the municipal area have set precedents which have taken on new life over generations. The contemporary migrations detailed in Chapter 5 unfold in conversation with the vivid layering of influences across the urban area. As indicated in Chapter 3, the densely populated military heritage of areas such as Kenya Ward and Oli continues to refract through the majority Muslim and Arabic-speaking populations of these areas. Oli, now a densely populated part of the city, offers affordable housing options and a varied linguistic and cultural heritage. Even cells such as Muru and Odrokodroa are named after Sudanese migrants. The area Orphanage, a densely populated area with limited infrastructure, is associated with an initiative set up by a Nubian man to care for Sudanese orphans, displaced by civil war (Actogether, 2010, p. 12). Private investments in social infrastructures are just one example of the myriad ways diverse populations have developed the urban tapestry.

To offer another example, Ezoova is a cell situated west of the main road leading to Arua City from the south. It was settled by Alur populations as the first British District Commissioner for West Nile granted ownership of the land to Alur-speaking men who had shown loyalty to the occupying administration (Southall, 1953, p. 283). As Ezoova's LCI narrated, the area 'used to be a forest or a reserve populated by bush pigs' (I-119). In recent years, the area, which was formerly considered to be removed from the core thrum of the city, has benefited from city-wide rises in land prices. The land-owning descendants of these individuals have sought to capitalise on the increased demand for land in this area. The LCI narrated that young men are now using their inherited land as a way to secure 'school fees with the intention of buying another one when they get a salary' (I-119). Now the area has a distinctly cosmopolitan feel, characterised by the presence of a wide range of nationalities and ethnicities. This includes

substantial numbers of South Sudanese households who live in rental properties. Two South Sudanese interlocutors, both of whom had arrived long before the 2013 conflict, had even been able to purchase land under their husbands' names and develop sizeable properties. Importantly, core infrastructures in the area have been developed in and around these changes. One resident contributed substantially to funding for the installation of an electricity pole.

In a more widely cited example, during the exile of the 1980s, Ugandans displaced from Maracha and districts further south located themselves in Aru, where they could remain close to the border and therefore to their homes. During this time, West Nilers were diversely implicated in the production of Aru, producing relational ties and connections that were built to ensure survival. Meagher (1990) describes in rich detail how this period of displacement in the Ituri region of DRC accelerated the development of important cross-border trade networks, which provided new avenues for material sustenance in Arua and its surrounds. With improved security enabling return, these dynamics have, in turn, been remade over subsequent decades. The adaptive response of West Nilers in displacement laid the foundations for lucrative sources of trade through to the 2000s (Titeca, 2012).

As these examples indicate, the urban arena is densely layered in dynamic conversation with colonial and postcolonial, local, national, and international politics and economics. This has reciprocally informed and reshaped state projects and entrenched established modes of urban development in Arua. Often, these dynamics occur in ways that are implicitly sanctioned, if not officially legitimised by state actors. In her examination of regulatory authority in the Chad Basin, Janet Roitman observed that the nation-state and non-national forms of accumulation are highly ambiguous, 'often reciprocal and complicitous as much as they are competitive and antagonistic' (2001, p. 241). Addressing smuggling in Arua in the early 2000s, Titeca (2012) similarly shows how state actors and non-state authorities, too, became reciprocally embedded in illicit cross-border trade networks of fuel, cigarettes, salt, soap, sugar, and kitenge. State officials gradually permeated spaces of trade, such that by the early 2000s, the state was involved informally in Arua's core economic life (2012, pp. 52-56).

These trading practices relied on relationships of dependence, complicity and benefit between villagers, local councillors, elders, and state officials. In Arua, the trade literature is a telling

reflection of the dense and overlapping networks of authority and allegiance that sit astride governance and commercial activity. Similar dynamics can be seen with the positioning of settlements and the well-established patterns of trading and aid resources by refugees, aid workers, and government staff. Leopold (2005, pp. 52-53), for example, described how the price of commodities enabled people, including state actors, to get money from relief aid. As these scholars suggest, the highly ambiguous terms of engagement between different forms of authority create a richly fertile terrain for the exigencies of state power.

The formally legitimated governing infrastructures of Arua, granted city status in 2020, now encompass an expansive and diverse population. However, they remain ill-prepared for the scale of urban growth. The structure of government financing exacerbates the challenges posed by this expansion. Both district and municipal governments rely heavily on central government transfers, which are often calculated based on outdated census data and fixed spatial delineations (Arup, 2016, pp. 22–23). As a result, the allocation of funds rarely reflects the actual demands on urban infrastructure. This mismatch produces severe budgetary imbalances and places significant strain on already weak and under-resourced public services. The consequences are especially acute in Arua and other border cities, which experience not only internal rural-urban migration but also sustained cross-border flows from the DRC and South Sudan. On a daily basis, an estimated 200 to 250 individuals cross into Arua to access medical and educational services (*ibid.*, p. 23). Local service providers consistently cite this regional dependency as a key pressure point on the city's overstretched infrastructure.

Formal investment in Arua's development has been both uneven and sporadic. Much like in other parts of Uganda, infrastructure funding has tended to follow the interests of specific industries or political priorities, rather than responding to the lived needs of urban residents. As outlined in Chapter 3, although Arua saw some infrastructural expansion under the Amin regime, much of that development was destroyed in the turmoil that followed. In the years since, the town has benefited from its strategic proximity to the DRC, where commercial activity has driven private investment. Nevertheless, up until 2005, Arua remained relatively cut off from the rest of Uganda due to widespread conflict in the northern region. The uneven accumulation of resources and investment in the area has produced ambivalent outcomes, generating

opportunities at the margins while simultaneously deepening infrastructural and service provision gaps.

Non-state actors have long played a critical role in supporting social infrastructure in the absence of sustained state investment. The church, in particular, has been central to Arua's urban fabric. Faith-based institutions—particularly in areas such as Ediofe, St Philips, and Mvara, where major Anglican and Catholic cathedrals are located—have offered relatively stable social anchors for the city's diverse populations. Yet, the prominence of churches in Arua's urban life is the product of specific historical conditions. In the past, Christianity in the city was perceived as socially and economically exclusive, associated with the aspirations of the upwardly mobile and treated with suspicion by the broader population. This perception shifted dramatically during the violence of the early 1980s, when the church emerged as a vital source of protection. In a period when the state was itself a perpetrator of terror and humanitarian assistance was absent, the church became a critical refuge for the largely rural population (Storer, 2024, p. 6). These legacies of religious infrastructure have continued to shape Arua's urban development, though they, too, are embedded in historically contingent and shifting relations of trust, authority, and belonging.

Though much scholarly attention has focused on the role of formal humanitarian provision in shaping urban production (Sanyal, 2014; Büscher and Vlassenroot, 2009; Büscher *et al.*, 2018), in Arua the historical absence of sustained humanitarian or state investment in infrastructure has drawn in diverse populations and fostered innovative forms of adaptation and development in the urban periphery. The formal displacement economy, structured around humanitarian agencies whose regional headquarters were often located in Arua, exemplifies this dynamic. These agencies frequently underinvested in the town itself, despite their administrative presence. Nonetheless, even minimal interventions, such as the construction of Arua's first tarmacked road by UNHCR, had disproportionate impacts, largely due to the vacuum left by other absent or inactive actors. This uneven investment pattern and the dialogue with state absence have become defining features of Arua's urban development.

Mobility, in this context, cannot be overstated. The city's economic vitality and social complexity are rooted in flows of goods, people, services, and information. This mobility links Arua not just to Uganda's national terrain but to regional geographies spanning the DRC and South Sudan.

The city's relative material underdevelopment is thus offset by its outsized role in regional circulations. It has long served as a connective hub, enabling displaced populations, businesspeople, and rural migrants alike to move goods, access services, and maintain kin networks. These complex social arrangements have enabled the development of layered forms of self-reliance that defy dominant humanitarian imaginaries, which tend to frame self-reliance in narrowly individualised, market-oriented, and spatially confined terms. In Uganda's settlements, under humanitarian management practices self-reliance is often visualised through structured spatiality—allocated plots, subsistence agriculture, and projectized livelihoods. In contrast, in Arua, what might be understood as a cultural archive of knowledge about wealth and survival is relational and collective, embedded in people and their movements rather than plots and production.[107]

In recent years, the outsized significance of Arua—as a spatial, relational, and financial node—has gained new attention from planners and policymakers. It is these dynamics that the chapter now turns to explore. As urban geographer Jennifer Robinson (2002, p. 545) narrates in her articulation of 'ordinary cities', the city is a result of 'networks which stretch beyond the physical form of the city and place it within a range of connections to other places in the world'. Arua exemplifies this formulation. Its elasticity and malleability, forged through a multi-directional and enduring encounter with mobility, have produced a city that is at once socially complex and highly financialised. The dual logics of formalised humanitarian response and everyday adaptive survival continue to shape its contemporary realities. As is common in border areas (Raeymaekers, 2007; Nugent, 2019), externally designed projects—whether introduced by the British colonial state, international aid institutions, or national ministries—have long been appropriated, reinterpreted, and repurposed by Arua's diverse residents, each differentially positioned within its socio-political and economic landscapes.

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[107] In describing this as an archive of cultural knowledge I evoke Wendy James' (1988) study of moral knowledge among Uduk, Sudan. The idea emerges from her anthropological observations of the ways that cultural memory, social norms and values, and historical experiences are not documented as written texts but are nonetheless reproduced within communities, even during displacement. These are richly embodied and experiential forms of knowledge that are negotiated and adapted in accordance with changing contexts. I address this more concretely in the next chapter.

In contrast to the historical dynamics of displacement in Arua, which unfolded largely in the absence of formal humanitarian infrastructure, the contemporary moment is marked by the growing entanglement of displacement with the institutional presence and practices of the international aid industry. This shift aligns more closely with conventional accounts of how humanitarian aid indirectly remakes urban space, through its influence on institutions, governance structures, and spatial configurations (Büscher and Vlassenroot, 2009; Büscher *et al.,* 2018). Drawing on the concept of humanitarian urbanism, Potvin (2013, p. 3) describes this as the 'production of space through humanitarian action', with particular emphasis on the ways humanitarian actors assert themselves in the urban landscape, often advancing neoliberal agendas and capitalist logics under the guise of aid. Building on this, Büscher *et al.* argue for greater recognition of humanitarian agencies not simply as service providers but as active agents in urban governance, reshaping local institutional environments by working through and reconfiguring existing power structures (2018, p. 358).

In Arua, the humanitarian economy has become a key component of the city's political and economic fabric. Aid agencies, originally stationed as logistical hubs for servicing surrounding displacement camps, have now become semi-permanent actors, entangled with the ongoing governance of public service delivery—a role exacerbated by the state's enduring dependence on external assistance (Branch, 2013). Yet this formal humanitarian infrastructure sits alongside, and often in tension with, more ambiguous forms of urban presence and belonging. Under Uganda's framework of freedom of movement, the boundaries between legality, permissibility, and informal settlement are actively deferred. Refugees are simultaneously acknowledged and unacknowledged, incorporated into the city's service economy while remaining peripheral to formal systems of recognition and support.

This ambiguous status produces a highly monetised mode of urban inhabitation. In the absence of consistent formal assistance, South Sudanese residents in Arua must navigate a transactional urban environment, where access to housing, healthcare, education, and even legitimacy is conditioned by the capacity to pay. Bureaucrats, while publicly promoting a discourse of hospitality and inclusion, often do little to provide meaningful support to refugee populations. As a chairman of a South Sudanese cultural association put it, 'it has become a way of getting

resources from refugees' (F-1). The generosity and flexibility of the hosting state appear instead as a feature of mutual exchange rooted in transaction.

The refugee figure circulates within political discourse as a kind of currency—a spectral signifier mobilised to justify financial claims, infrastructural expansion, or humanitarian presence. This invocation often unfolds through a Derridean dynamic: 'the trace is the mark of the absence of a presence' (Spivak in Derrida, 1976, p. xvii). In this formulation, the refugee is not encountered as a fully present subject but rather as an inscription—legible only through institutional claims made in their name, while their material lives and political voices remain bracketed or deferred. This spectral function renders the refugee both central and peripheral: invoked yet disappeared. At the same time as they are counted, named, and categorised, refugees are also displaced from the spaces of decision-making and symbolic recognition. Together, these frameworks help illuminate how refugee subjecthood is staged, erased, and instrumentalised within humanitarian governance. In contexts such as Arua, the refugee is rendered visible in aggregate form—as a population to be registered, monitored, and mapped—yet absent in any meaningful sense from political deliberation. The refugee's 'value' is produced through this paradox: a spectral trace made actionable for financial and bureaucratic claims, even as the actual lives of displaced persons recede from view.

Turning towards the city

A major part of the turn towards cities has been the global repositioning of local government institutions as key responders to and stewards of refugee governance. Though authorities in the city are multiple and diffuse - including clan authorities, politicians, religious leaders, technocrats, rural elders, business leaders, and community associations – the local government, understood in this context as the municipal authority, has become a key focus for donor-funded initiatives seeking to manage the urban arena.[108]

For displacement responses, this process arguably circumvents national policy restrictions. Humanitarian funding is usually funnelled through UNHCR and national-level government

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[108] Notwithstanding the sizeable impact of remittances and other funding routes such as faith-based organisations.

institutions and allocated specifically for districts that are recognised as hosting refugees. However, by and large, these have repeated earlier patterns with little concern for local politics, either Ugandan, South Sudanese or Congolese, minimal involvement of South Sudanese or Congolese residents of the city and little tangible impact. In contexts of highly centralised management of displaced populations, the turn towards cities is a substantial departure with potentially major political implications. As such, this needs to be situated as a highly political move. As it stands, activities enacted within secondary cities have concentrated on surveys seeking to enumerate populations. In doing so, they replicate longstanding techniques of state simplification and spatial ordering (Kibreab, 1996; Scott, 1998), wherein visibility is equated with control and recognition is mediated through legibility.

This comes at an important moment for Arua. Under the expanded jurisdiction of local government, the scope for intervention increased dramatically. Urban technocrats present the expanded arena of urban governance as a lagging reflection of changes underway in increasingly urbanised spaces across Arua, with the local state having to retroactively assert authority over a space which had already urbanised through the investments of its residents (see Figure 17). As described by Arua City's urban planner, 'The whole of the city is undergoing serious fragmentation, even deep in the village. At the centre of town, the low-density area was formerly 50 m x 40 m, but that has now been reduced to 30 m x 40 m. It is a maximum of five people for low-density. If you look at the housing sector, less than 40% is officially approved. But in [the Central Business District], it is over 80%; here, you cannot dodge. Before 1995, all the land in the country belonged to the state, so enforcement of any development was easier' (I-148). Privatisation of land rights and the dated definition of the urban planning domain limited the enforceability of urban planning law. As one LC for a village 6 km from the city centre described, 'Now because of the city, it is coming. The whole of Ayivu is going to be under urban planning' (I-119).

The current pressures in and around the city have important consequences for city residents, authorities in the city and the material landscape of the city. The proclamation of the city has had vital consequences for the governance and service capacity in the city. As the city health

Figure 17 - Semi-permanent housing in Arua Central Business District. Source: Brown, 2022.

inspector put it 'as a city, there is still a lot that is not in place. It was formed without proper planning. Up to date, we still share a lot of things with the district' (I-117). The head of HR for the city (who was the former community development officer for the municipality) commented that this was a complex and critically understaffed situation, 'some missed salary for 6 months, and if you do not come, we do not know who was missed. And, of course, there are staff who were migrated who had disciplinary issues that were not forwarded to us, and yet under the former place, they could have been suspended' (I-147). City-level staff operating in senior capacities remarked that they were 'yet to be appointed' and lacked sufficient transportation resources to reach the full breadth of the territory. As the head of HR went on to explain, 'More were migrated than the available positions – for example, CDOs needed only two, but those migrated to the city were seven. Ayivu formerly had seven sub-counties. The structure only says one for each division. Being a rural place, they need more people. Some sectors really need you to be present in the community' (I-147).

Many repeated the claim that the new boundaries of the city had made Arua the largest city in terms of land mass in the world, or at the very least on the continent. Regardless of the claim's invalidity, this reflects a pervasive sense of an uncontrolled expanse and a poorly thought-through template for city-making. City membership has also had important taxation implications. Wealthier middle-class elites were reportedly purchasing residences in Vurra, south of Arua city, to avoid city taxation. Meanwhile, the former LCIII, who was against the scale of the expansion, reported, 'When politics came, they wanted the entire Ayivu to come within. Now, we are facing the consequences. Vurra people are wise – they said they do not want to be part of the city. Village people are now saying they do not want it and are refusing to pay for the latrines' (I-120). In a reflection of the widely held ambivalent relationship with state authority, the drastic expansion of local state oversight and the administrative and financial burden associated with incorporation with the city were the subject of fierce contestation throughout my data collection. As explained in Chapter 3, at the time of the data collection, even the territorial boundaries of the city were a source of contention to the extent that violent threats were made against the politician who oversaw the process (Adiga, 2021; Monitor, 2020). The ongoing changes to urban governance and the active debates around who counts in budgetary terms matter for how we understand formal ideations of integration and inclusion, and point to the contentious political and administrative arena into which non-citizen populations are emplaced.

Pursuing recognition

The urbanisation of displacement presents significant governance challenges, particularly due to the bureaucratic denial of urban refugees' presence within national planning frameworks. The city health inspector explained: 'There is no specific consideration for urban refugees to date. It has been a long-term challenge because the government policy has never accepted their presence. Because our planning has been only for the citizens, the refugee population is not captured, and this has an implication for resource allocation' (I-117). As city health officials note, national policies often fail to recognise the refugee population, rendering them invisible in resource allocation calculations. This bureaucratic denial—the refusal to officially acknowledge the presence of refugees in urban spaces—has profound implications for local governance. Cities, tasked with providing essential services, are left to manage the strain on already

overstretched systems, but without the necessary funding or support to account for the needs of non-citizen migrants (see, for example, The Independent, 2021).

At this level, state officials are not directly involved in decision-making about refugee populations, in contrast to officials in formally recognised refugee-hosting districts who have been enrolled in refugee service provision.[109] In newspapers, radio broadcasts and meetings, local state representatives stress the pressure this places on social services such as water, healthcare and education (The Independent, 2022). City and district officials explained that over many years, OPM and UNHCR have repeatedly rejected their requests. The city health officer, when dealing with cases concerning refugee residents in town, explained, 'We tried to knock at the doors of OPM and UNHCR, but they only say they do not recognise refugees here' (I-117). The former mayor of Arua town similarly explained, 'Even if we attempted to get OPM. The RDO, Solomon Osakan, would boldly tell us, "We only deal with those in the camps. The government cannot feed these people out here…" They told us openly that their services are rurally based' (I-120). Accordingly, the disjuncture between official refugee architecture at the national level and practice emerges as a productive space for the expression of local state discontent. Given the constraints imposed by Uganda's national framework, the critical issue becomes who counts as a refugee under different scales of government.

While the city emerges as a recognisable form of local government, the city government itself remains disconnected from more local levels of representation. The fragile networks of coordination in Arua and the limited interface between LCIs and senior city-level officials is particularly limiting. LCIs are the 'closest' form of political representation in Uganda. They are partisan figures, embedded in their local communities. Their roles include intervening in community disputes and providing an avenue for bureaucratic and administrative legitimation. They can also be important nodes of resource distribution - in particular, LCs can nominate residents for access to services such as the distribution of mosquito nets and access to highly

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[109] The jostling for funds and authority associated with the formal infrastructure has been a contentious issue for several refugee-hosting districts. Ocea Zone in Rhino Camp, the site of the reception centre and the core market in the settlement, is situated on the border of Madi-Okollo and Terego district producing fierce contestation over the boundaries between the two.

coveted livelihood activities. The former mayor explained, 'without involving LCs, those technocrats will do nothing. Whoever comes within the cell, they have all the by-laws, so they should get to know the LC' (I-120).

The disconnect between office-based and street-level bureaucrats complicates the possibilities of coherent platforming between refugees and state authorities in the city. Senior city authorities demonstrated remarkably little awareness of or interest in the experiences of their non-citizen residents. Interviews with city-level bureaucratic staff soon revealed the limited engagement and understanding of the challenges facing refugees in the city. At the senior technocratic level, their accounts were highly anecdotal and limited. In public discourse, they would participate in the abstraction of the 'refugee', while keeping their distance from their everyday experiences. By contrast, those involved in dispensing care and services daily, including teachers, local politicians, and health care providers, were more knowledgeable. At a local level, refugees might formally register with the LC, a school, church, police, and healthcare, but none of these are considered obligatory, and so introductions unfold over elongated time horizons dictated by need. Teachers and health professionals alike were able to confidently narrate the regularity of their direct encounters with 'refugees'. As the city health inspector explained, because he was required to go to the field frequently, bringing him into direct contact with city residents, including refugees, 'we interface a lot' (I-117). Meanwhile, because refugees are often excluded from programmed activities in urban areas, they do not qualify to access support from their local cell leaders (LCIs).

As the local state attempts to mobilise these populations in discourses to apply pressure to central government coffers and to procure investments from international institutions and aid agencies, OPM staff obfuscate these claims by stressing that the number of refugees in the city was not known. As a result, there has been a series of siloed and asynchronous activities to document the relevant populations. Several headteachers of primary and secondary schools in Arua City indicated that they making efforts to tabulate the nationalities of their students (I-165, 170). The City Education Officer, in turn, reported that he was in the process of collating data from schools in the city (I-164). The LCI of Ayooze,[110] at the point of interview, was in the

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[110] Indicated as Oyoze on Figure 3.

middle of counting the population in his cell (I-124). Simultaneously, working in conjunction with aid and research agencies, government bureaucrats have conducted a series of enumeration activities. An early report, conducted under the municipality, sought to produce key data which could be used to inform planning and resource allocation (Lozet and Castro, 2020). Data collected in late 2020, produced by AVSI Foundation, Arua City and Uganda Bureau of Statistics, estimated the population of the Central Division to be 67,900, of which 10% were refugees. 98% of whom were from South Sudan (AVSI Foundation *et al.*, 2021). However, the findings of this report were contested. As the IT officer, then the municipal liaison for the enumeration, explained, 'There was a report that established the actual number within the town, but the majority lie outside the central municipality. So, there is a need for us to do a comprehensive assessment for ourselves, and we will have to submit this again for OPM' (I-121). The comprehensive assessment eventually materialised as the 2004 VNG International report.

Questions of visibility and legibility for displaced populations have received significant scholarly attention. As Jeff Crisp put it in 1999, 'it is almost impossible to think or write about refugee-related issues without some reference to statistics' (p. 2). Statistical detail is a requirement for the provision of budgeting, mobilising resources, planning, delivering protection and monitoring assistance, though, as Harrell-Bond, Voutirea and Leopold (1992) argue, there is limited relevance for statistics that fail to represent their target populations accurately. Pushing back against narratives that centre benign planning aspirations, scholars have argued that these quantification exercises speak directly to an attempt to render populations 'administratively convenient' (Scott, 1998, p. 3). Where some scholars have argued that this data collection forms a medium of control for Foucauldian imaginaries of the state (Scott, 1998; Torpey, 2000), Breckenridge and Szreter caution against overstating 'the bureaucratic enthusiasm for information gathering' (2012, p. 6). Building on this in her observations of the Refugee Affairs Secretariat of Kenya, Walkey argues that central state bureaucrats responsible for refugees instead pursue procedural indifference to limit the ability of refugees to make claims on the state (2019). Thus, ignorance and uncertainty can be considered as important tools within national bureaucracies resisting agendas for inclusion. This description seems particularly fitting for the role played by the national state here, particularly OPM.

By contrast, the local government of Arua is consistently pursuing knowledge about refugees to compel change in key policies. The dissonance between central state and local state narratives points to the fragmentation and subtle negotiations of state power that can occur between state actors and the uneven processes of governance over refugees at the local level. In this way, they are asserting claims as the appropriate stewards for facilitating refugee inclusion by differentiating itself as a government body uniquely embedded in the local spatiality. This marks an important point of disjuncture for historical engagements between city infrastructures and non-citizen populations in Uganda. Instead of tacit acceptance, 'refugees' have acquired a specific political currency in this setting in dialogue with international actors enrolled in data collection activities and embed themselves in 'controversial debate[s] concerning registration' (James and Koch, 2020, p. 6). Thus, 'refugees' become a figurative and symbolic expression of bureaucratic manoeuvring.

There is an explicit tension between formal ideas of what the city should be, the role of state authorities therein and the reality of the city. In this complex and fragmented authority space, these tensions are in dynamic negotiation. On this basis, one might ask what occurs when municipal governments are positioned as authoritative actors in advancing inclusive approaches to migration governance. In Arua, while there is rhetorical commitment to refugee recognition at the city level, the practical outcomes have been limited. Municipal interventions have largely been confined to the quantification of refugee households, with minimal progress made in structurally incorporating refugees into urban infrastructures or decision-making processes. The following case concerning early city-led engagements with refugee populations traces the discursive dissonance as it reverberates in the material landscape of the city. As Simone argues, city government becomes a modality for development as a specific vision for governance (2004a), which entrenches pre-established modes of operation in the official realm in ways that perpetuate social injustice in the urban terrain (Davies *et al.,* 2017).

Figure 18 - Youth Centre on Enyau Road. Source: Brown, 2022.

Enyau Road

Alongside the above-mentioned census activities conducted with AVSI Foundation and the Ugandan Bureau of Statistics, Arua municipality developed a project centred around the construction of a youth centre, as shown in Figure 18. This centre was intended to function as a community space for refugee and citizen youth to acquire livelihood skills side-by-side. The youth centre, located on Enyau Road, was completed in early 2022. Until May 2024, the centre remained empty and absent of activity of any kind. Okello, the IT office for the city and the coordinator for the project, explained that the youth centre faces two problems: 'One, the infrastructure allows rain in, so it cannot facilitate the training, and two, the management. Though it is meant to be in young people's hands, they [government staff] fear the equipment will be sold off' (I-121). He deflected responsibility for the derelict space. Firstly, though he acknowledged the design flaws of the structure, he explained that the limitations of the structure were due to insufficient funding. He suggested that this iteration of the centre was only meant to be temporary, 'something that could easily be taken down so that the real plan could be implemented at the point where enough funds were available.' Secondly, the abstracted city officials who demonstrate concern that young people cannot be trusted to manage the centre justify themselves using the failure of a past project. Sitting opposite the youth centre is the children's library, as can be seen in Figure 19. The library was built with the support of UN-Habitat in 2014 (Lekuru, 2016). Though it had once been operational, 'We faced similar

Figure 19 - The former Children's Library, which serves as a gym and provides office space for several community organisations and businesses. Source: Brown, 2022.

problems with the children's library, which is currently used as a boxing gym. We found that the books would get lost due to poor management' (I-121).

Similar patterns have played out in the more recent Mayors Migration Council project, which involved city staff recruiting refugee leaders and young people to participate in community mobilisation activities focused on waste collection (Adiga, 2023). On coordination day, the refugees were presented with a budget that seemed to be devoted mainly to transportation costs and told to mobilise and lead groups in local litter picking. After this, participants reported that they had never heard from the programme coordinators again. Those I spoke to suggested that they were only invited for the day so that those running the projects could gather pictures for donor feedback reports. Their dissatisfaction and marked lack of surprise reflected experiential knowledge of state authority and unequal power relations. Amidst wider debates about the legitimacy of the city and its spatial claims, the lack of accountability and tangible impact for refugees suggests that governmental authorities in Arua may be performing an 'impersonal, technocratic, and neutral [character] – as not exercising power – but instead as serving others' to establish their own legitimacy (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999, p. 708). While political discourse at the national level focuses on the issue of protection, narratives within the city take on a very different tone. This can, in turn, be read as a function of the political dynamics of representation, whereby politicians have obligations to their constituents and need to mobilise material resources – meanwhile, non-citizen populations are overlooked in the dynamics of accountability.

Representation: What role for the city?

Framing the presence of these populations as a straightforward technocratic problem, the figure of the 'refugee' emerges from the municipal authority as any potential migrant other. The discourses espoused by politicians and senior bureaucrats in Arua produce the figure of the refugee as an archetype, rather than people embedded in complex realities and deep histories of connection with the region. The refugee serves as a convenient medium for the simplification of the articulation of the need for additional resources, abstracted as a soft currency. Reflecting the notion of refugees and migrants as opportunities rather than a matter of humanitarian values or ethics. As Zetter (1991, p. 40) notes, the definition of a refugee is itself subject to negotiation and reformulation: 'In practice, there are many interpretations of the definition, and, like currencies, they have fluctuating values and exchange rates.' There is a sense that the managerial technocrats and senior politicians in Arua perceive refugees as a valuable instrument for making claims for resources despite a distinct lack of engagement with South Sudanese denizens of the city. Ultimately, refugees become a conduit for channelling resources between donors and the city and hopes of increasing state-directed resources to the city, with limited attention to the realities of everyday refuge. South Sudanese and Congolese residents of the city – 'refugees' assume relevance as statistical embodiments of resource potential. In this way, they become one of the particular groups that 'become receptacles for particular kinds of policies provided political-economic agendas are being serviced … In this way, these residents count' (Simone, 2021, p. 4). The abstract life value represented by the 'refugee' thus becomes a form of currency, a bearer 'of a social value that is potentially capitalizable or convertible to other forms of value' (Tadiar, 2022, p. 50). The abstract figure, therefore, is mobilised as a demand for attention, response, and action. In this way, 'surplus populations … are treated as a pool of disposable lifetimes that can serve as liquid reserves (soft currency) for speculative manoeuvres of [a particular branch of] state' (*ibid.*, p. xiv).

The spectre of inclusivity in the flexible tapestry of the city and the generous accommodations of overstretched service infrastructures masks the mechanisms by which South Sudanese people eke out spaces of inclusion through critical, albeit limited, forms of organisation. These include trade associations, religious institutions, and community groups, often structured along shared linguistic, regional, religious, or familial affiliations. Although these networks provide only

modest material support, they play a vital role in shaping the social and spatial fabric of the city. Their leaders frequently act as intermediaries in moments of tension, such as arrests or domestic disputes, thus performing crucial governance functions in the absence of formal political representation. However, these initiatives tend to operate in a siloed manner and, while influential, are insufficient on their own to sustain refugee populations in the everyday. Rather than serving as substitutes for formal inclusion, they underscore the need for more integrated and participatory urban governance frameworks that genuinely engage with the realities of displacement in the city.

To provide an example, the construction and formation of churches and their associations often form networks along segmented lines – churches, much like community associations, are fractured along ethnic, home-country geography lines. The fractured spaces of community and authority are themselves highly contested and can be the product of further division. Churches, for example, serve as important spaces of connection, particularly for those who are not multilingual and so cannot so easily integrate with their Ugandan neighbours. However, these ethno-linguistically based church communities can also function along exclusionary lines, serving to reinforce political and social divisions (Storer, 2024, p. 8).[111] As their fragmentation would suggest, these are heterogeneous spaces, and South Sudanese people build and contribute to different relational networks. Yet, attempts at formal engagements with refugee communities have revolved around one organisation in particular.

The South Sudanese Refugee Association (SSURA), originating in Koboko, has become the sub-regional interlocutor with the government and international agencies. It has both visibility and the capacity to manage funds. However, the association is also perceived by some to be tacitly amplifying inter-community tensions, by prioritising engagement with Equatorian community groups. The unelected body is the only conduit for donor funds and claims to be representative of all South Sudanese refugees in Arua, yet it remains disconnected from populations outside the staff social networks. In many ways, the shifts towards local government at the city level and

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[111] Church leaders are often held in high moral authority, but when called to adjudicate on problems, such as criminal accusations or pregnancy among unmarried couples, they are seen to act in the interests of their familial and ethnic ties.

towards refugee-led organisations such as SSURA tread a well-worn path where localisation is unproblematically conducted through specific individuals and institutions which reflect the established structures of governance. This is not intended to outright dismiss these efforts, but to suggest that we cast a critical eye over 'new' approaches that this will necessarily benefit the urban poor. The funding architecture remains dominated by international donor priorities and preferences, local politics continues to hold sway over the scope for action amidst vested interests and while government staff may be deeply embedded in local practices and contexts (though not always), they remain quite a detached social class in many ways.

Conclusion

While the city postures itself as a progressive, internationally attuned actor—keen to signal its alignment with both national development agendas and internationalist norms—its actual capacity to influence refugee policy remains structurally constrained by OPM. This disjuncture is not new. Nearly two decades ago, similar tensions were exposed during the transition of service provision from UNHCR to district governments. As Meyer (2006, p. 39) illustrates, village development planning processes incorporated participatory, bottom-up consultation for citizen villages, yet conspicuously excluded refugees from these mechanisms. Refugee settlements remained administratively and politically peripheral, their developmental needs sidelined. This marginalisation persists. In the contemporary moment, Mylan (2025) underscores how refugee voices continue to be absent from district-level planning and representation. Instead, OPM officials—unelected, unaccountable, and externally positioned—assume the role of spokespersons for refugee populations, displacing their agency under the guise of benevolent administration.

Refugees, then, become a kind of soft currency: their presence is leveraged by the city to attract international attention, humanitarian resources, and political capital, yet their actual participation in governance, planning, or resource allocation remains minimal or symbolic at best. Behind the façade of inclusion lies a system of strategic invisibilisation—where refugees are rendered legible enough to be counted, but not heard; present enough to justify funding, but absent from decision-making. Arua City, situated at the nexus of cross-border trade and post-conflict mobility, illustrates this paradox with particular clarity. While its cosmopolitan urbanity and borderland dynamism are celebrated (Leopold, 2005, 2011; Titeca, 2012), the lived realities of

displaced populations navigating these spaces remain underexplored. As the former LCIII of Arua Municipality remarked, 'God has blessed Arua because of the proximity to the borders' (I-120), but this blessing does not extend evenly. Refugees in Arua are not merely passive recipients of assistance; they actively situate themselves between spaces of life and aid, often forging alternative modes of urban belonging. Yet this everyday urban citizenship is rarely recognised in formal planning activities.

Chapter 7: Renting and Removal in Arua City

In Arua, South Sudanese residents, as non-citizen populations, are unevenly enrolled in the local infrastructure of rental housing, which operates through the overlapping terrains of profit-making and extraction and moral and social claims. Tracing the processes of eviction that unfold in Arua City points to the people and patterns that are obscured and concealed by the presumption of financial independence.

Introduction

Previous chapters pointed to the rapid changes underway in and around Arua City. These changes have had major impacts on prospects for rental housing. Arua has been growing at a rate of 3.2% per annum – a growth rate 1% higher than that of the capital (Abudu *et al.,* 2019). In response to the rapid growth in demand, land values have increased, and landowners have responded accordingly. Those who claim land ownership in and around the town have led subdivisions of land, partly to cope with familial land demands and partly to seize on the opportunities presented by an overburdened residential and commercial property infrastructure. In accordance with the Refugee Regulations 2010, refugees are unable to own land. As such, housing brings refugees into contractual relationships with Ugandans who are legally entitled to own homes, subjecting South Sudanese refugees to unequal property relations in largely informalised markets.

This chapter proceeds by examining the geographical history of renting and landlording in Arua. It argues that rental markets in Arua have emerged in close conversation with colonial practices of social ordering, which produced differential regimes of landownership in the urban environs. The second sub-section examines the ways South Sudanese persons are differentially positioned in financially precarious property relations as tenants. Within these unequal property relationships, South Sudanese people manoeuvre around fragile networks of resources. The third sub-section examines the ways that housing in Arua is mediated through relations beyond property markets and legal protections. As argued in Chapter 5, South Sudanese people, their neighbours, and landlords are entangled in rich moral economies. This creates alternative avenues for contesting the legal bounds of the property market through which households postpone the moment of eviction, however temporarily. Beyond formal protection mechanisms, the relational webs of tenants, including their Ugandan neighbours and landlords, form highly

contingent networks of potential support. The chapter delves into the intimate relational dynamics which shape people's abilities and desire to maintain home spaces within the city. Drawing on extended case studies, the chapter also examines the processes of removal across Arua's housing markets as a site where the haunting presence of the spectre is rendered visible. Claims of 'self-reliance' in the city overlook the ways that acts of care are displaced into the private sphere and the market. The final section focuses on the wake of evictions. It demonstrates the unbending, singular linear futurity of 'self-reliance' as a structuring force on bureaucratic infrastructures of protection.

Historical geography of property relations and evictions

This section explores the connections and divergences between customary land tenure and urban land markets, highlighting how colonial and postcolonial land management practices have shaped evolving understandings of shelter and contributed to the expansion of the rental market. It argues that rental markets in Arua have developed in close dialogue with colonial legacies of social ordering, which established differential regimes of landownership across the urban landscape. Shelter is a complex and cross-cutting issue—to begin, I focus on customary land tenure, drawing on work that points to the dynamic interplay between moral orders, social belonging, and shifting socio-political contexts that inform ideas about shelter and belonging in Arua (Storer, 2020).[112] Understanding these historical trajectories is crucial to making sense of contemporary phenomena such as evictions, contested claims to land, and broader struggles over belonging and inclusion.

Customary land tenure

Colonial land management practices had complex ramifications for the form and viability of pre-colonial social relations. For example, among Lugbara clans, prior to colonial rule, collective units - known as enyati - structured customary land tenure. Others might also refer to these units as suru, as an indication of one's relational attachment to ancestral burial lands. Within their

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[112] Even within Lugbara communities, these customs are dynamic and at times divergent – the Ugandan landlords and communities I interfaced with in Arua identified majorly as Lugbara – that being said, Arua has a diverse population and so I do not wish to overextend these observations.

enyati, groups of relatives settled as relatively autonomous and productive units. Enyati were organised to cater to the family unit, which was itself subject to gerontocratic and patriarchal order. Ordinarily, under customary land tenure systems, when you marry and thereby perform some of the functions of social adulthood within the gendered relational framework, you are supposed to establish a new physical dwelling. Movement was an integral part of how people overcame limited land capacity issues. This highly gendered ordering of property relations had particular implications. In particular, men's access to land and the capacity to move and adapt the use of space to the needs of the unit and future units were integral to the foundational tenets of social functioning. By contrast, women had claims to customary land access but not property rights to land within this structure. These examples illustrate that although resources were not financialised under customary land tenure, they still circulated in highly uneven ways. Throughout the twentieth century, women were evicted from the aku of the husband's clan under the guise of an allegation of enyata, poisoning, often relating to envy and/or maltreatment, for example, of their co-wives or husbands (Storer, 2020, pp. 343-348). Researching in the 1980s, Allen notes similar dynamics among Madi communities - accusations of poisoning and immoral character underscored tensions within and between homes (1996). This is indicative of the ways that the resolution of disputes between and within households has historically led to exclusionary practices whereby evictions were justified based on moral claims.

As stressed in Chapter 3, British colonial interventions sought to socially engineer spatial and neatly delineated identity boundaries, amplifying local attachments to specific tracts of land. These practices of boundary-making and their concomitant promotion of sedentarism contributed to a wide-ranging reconfiguration of value, particularly for land in the urbanising areas of West Nile. The rapid growth of populations further exacerbated these dynamics. With rising population pressures, land, which was associated with near-total self-sufficiency in Lugbara society, became a precious commodity within delineated geographical boundaries. In the context of increasing rural overpopulation from the 1950s, evictions, which had previously been levied mainly at women, were increasingly targeted at male migrants. In the context of evictions, this was often blamed on elouja (sorcery). Still, it was also linked to frayed social relations wrought by colonial economies, whereby male migrants accrued cash from 'outside' and were said to abandon rural family members (Storer, 2020, p. 346). Movement was increasingly associated with

disruption to the social and moral order. These evictions were often fiercely negotiated and socially mediated based on customary law and ideas about the right to belong (see Chapter 8, Storer, 2020). These brief overviews point to the ways that complex socio-political and economic changes interface with recourse to moral claims.

Urban land management

British colonial occupation also introduced urban land management to the region, bringing with it specific regimes of private property rights and subjecting the 10 km^2 of Arua municipality to urban planning practices. Under this governance structure, the municipal authority claimed ownership of all land within the administrative boundaries and would lease it to occupants. While the predominantly rural setting of West Nile continued to operate with clan-based land ownership systems, in the newly demarcated urban setting, the colonial municipal authority became the 'custodian' of the land. Thus, urban land rights and property relations assumed a distinct character due to the formalisation of bureaucratic oversight in the municipality.

As indicated in Chapter 3, during the colonial period, urban populations concentrated in different areas based on linguistic, faith, and social dimensions, and their differential associations with British colonial occupation. Given the various migrations to the area, the economic opportunities associated with the town, and its proximity to the border, private development and rental markets have been significant parts of the town's tapestry for a long time. These patterns continued largely unabated through to the large-scale displacements of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Where pre-established identity and faith-based settlement had been the predominant mode of rural-to-urban transition in the post-independence era, the displacements of the 1980s and the subsequent return from exile changed the texture of urban land ownership and inhabitance substantially. Lands left unpopulated following the insecurity of the 1980s were often occupied by those returning from displacement. Unclaimed lands were later sold off in 1998/9 by the municipal authority. In addition to amplifying tensions between Ayivu and Aringa communities, these moves entrenched a top-down shift from customary rights to private land tenure, as the municipality asserted its authority to direct change and growth in Arua.

Nonetheless, the town's rapid growth beyond its administratively defined boundaries has meant that administratively led infrastructures have failed to keep pace with population growth and

demand. With the tenuous enforcement capacities of the municipality authority, landlords secured their boundaries through recourse to highly localised authority structures – LCs, clan leaders and elders who could be called on to advise on critical community issues. Abudu *et al.* (2019) trace this rapid growth to the 2002 peace accord signed between the Ugandan government and UNRF-II, which engendered a period of increased political stability. However, the popularity of Arua is also largely a reflection of instability across the northern and western borders and the wider failings of the humanitarian infrastructure. Arua's growth and development have proceeded unevenly, with specific ramifications for the contemporary geography of rental markets.

The sprawl of the city has been situated in the liminal space, where the city is perceived as a moral departure from the rural area. These different logics of tenure have long been associated with different moral registers, and the profiles of renters and landlords cannot be easily simplified. When Lugbarati-speaking families rent away from ancestral land, they are interpreted as stepping back from idealised and relational demonstrations of gerontocratic authority (Storer, 2020). This is linked to wider anxieties around limited access to land and losses inflicted by colonial occupation.[113] The urban reflects a distancing through specific urban subjectivities. This is not to suggest that urban property relations are amoral – far from it, diverse land issues have been intimately entangled with moral and social regulations, including the intervention of cultural and clan-based authorities. Indeed, the attachment to specific spatial arrangements borne out through these landed anxieties is a result of colonial boundary-making, population pressures, and the institutionalisation of private property rights. The growth of private property rights over several decades has conversed with wide repertoires concerned with the insecurity of land tenure in the urban arena. Weak legal protections and wider issues over land ownership compound this insecurity. In the urban arena, economic logics regulate property value, but social and moral logics still circulate in important ways. Collective mobilisation around notions of customary authority and forceful government-led interventions transgresses legal and economic bounds to assert moral probity (Storer, 2020, pp. 261-262).

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[113] See also Green, 2006.

In line with wider concerns over customary rights in Uganda, Lugbarati-speaking peoples often lament the presence of outsiders on their land. Threats to 'traditional' structures have long been a source of disturbance, and the fear of losing permanence has been a source of existential anxiety in this context. As one elder and former politician living from Terego narrated, 'As far as the value of land is concerned, for the Lugbara, land is God-given wealth; it should not be sold to foreigners... We do not want the Lugbara generation to become landless' (I-5). Land is seen as a divine gift, and self-sufficiency relies on maintaining this connection. The sale of clan land, especially to foreigners, continues to be a major source of contention - Lugbarati-speaking communities express extensive anxieties over the sale of land to those who are not 'of the soil.' However, the question of who is 'of the soil' is itself contested and changeable, as illustrated by the tensions between Ayivu and Aringa communities, during his PhD research Titeca (2008, p. 133) documented Ayivu elders' resistance to selling land to Aringa.

Generational disparities further complicate this landscape. An LCI in Pajulu described that younger men, such as Alur-speaking youth, sell their inherited land for more immediate economic ventures – for example, purchasing a car to start a taxi business - often with the intention of re-purchasing land later (I-119). These choices expose tensions between long-term communal security and immediate individual opportunity. Additionally, historical claims to land used for public services, such as schools and health centres, are being revisited. Clan elders' past decisions to lease land for collective benefit are now giving rise to contemporary disputes over ownership and compensation (Stephen, 2021). Altogether, land in this context is not only a site of economic value but also a locus of historical memory, intergenerational tension, and political struggle over identity and belonging.

Since the 1990s, the rapid growth of the urban population has increased the value of land in Arua enormously. This is reflected in governmental demands to encourage private property development. As explained by the former LC5 of Arua District, within the municipality, when the urban authority leases land, the owner, who becomes the principal investor landlord, 'is expected to develop it immediately. If not, by law you are supposed to hand it over to the urban

authority' (I-2).[114] Land ownership in the town and its surroundings is considered a major commercial opportunity. As City Council Male Worker representative and businessman, Stephen, whose family home is in Etori village, 7 km west of the CBD along the Congo border, narrated, 'In those days, you could buy land or property in town cheaply, but now it is almost five times more expensive. You can now buy properties here for almost one billion or five hundred million shillings' (I-8). Jafar, a young man vested with the responsibility of overseeing his family's urban property portfolio, described that in the contemporary setting, land sales start with the LC II. After preparing and signing a land sale or transfer agreement, 'other authorities like the municipal council and land board follow thereafter' (I-9). Land valuer and retired civil servant Ben highlighted that elders continue to play an important role in the sale of land, even in urban areas: 'Their presence is perceived as more of an assurance to the buyer that the land is sold by the rightful owner because these days some people are not themselves because of the increased value of land for money' (I-1).

The rates of both commercial and residential lettings have increased drastically since the mid-2010s. Businessman Stephen explained, 'Shops that used to go at 200,000 to 500,000 UGX now go at 700,000 UGX, even 1,000,000 UGX' (I-8). As of late 2022, a single room housing eight, with a shared latrine, 4 km on foot from the city centre, can cost 60,000 UGX per month. Central housing in its own compound costs upward of 1 million UGX per month. Landowners have responded to this by converting land and property into domestic and commercial properties available for rent. In particular, the displacement economy detailed in Chapter 5 has had enormous implications for the built environment of Arua, with wealthier landlords in prime locations repurposing their residential plots to cater for the demand of NGOs and international institutions. The commercial opportunities presented by rental properties have also contributed to the transformation of the dwelling space in urban environs to an increasingly commercialised and legalised entity.

Diverse populations of South Sudanese who have located themselves in the city have also created economic opportunities for local landholders. South Sudanese people, registered as

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[114] Though for a fee, many of these stipulations can be overlooked.

refugees, are unable to own land in accordance with the 2010 Refugee Regulations (65). The Regulations stipulate that '(2) A refugee shall not acquire or hold freehold interest in land in Uganda'.[115] As a result, South Sudanese people who are registered as refugees but reside in Arua are necessarily drawn into the volatile rental market. Moreover, even for those who are not registered, the rapid inflation of land prices renders land ownership out of reach for the majority.

Tenancies in contemporary Arua

Landlords in Arua have diverse profiles. Some may own and let several plots, while others subdivide their land to provide tenants with single-room occupancies. In densely populated areas, households even use bedsheets to divide their home and offer half of the room to rent.[116] Some have financed substantial commercial investments, with income from rental properties contributing one part of a wider repertoire of income-generating streams. The landlords engaged in this research had typically inherited or invested in some familial landholding and had subdivided this land for rental. Some have funded this through loans, and others have invested directly using their savings. Others, typically those with more resources, rent out their landholdings within Arua and take up residence in Kampala.

Over 70% of refugees in Arua reside in rental property (VNG International, 2024, pp. 68-9), spending on average 68% of their income on rent (*ibid.*, p. 72). As described in Chapter 5, discretionary pricing is a widespread practice. The rates landlords charge are influenced by high demand, limited supply *and,* importantly, by various interpersonal factors. Nationality is an important marker for some landlords in determining their prices. It was an open secret that landlords would often charge South Sudanese tenants more relative to their Ugandan counterparts. As Okello, a South Sudanese resident of RCS put it, 'If Ugandans will rent one room for 20,000 UGX. Refugees will rent 50,00 UGX. Nationals will be given a lower rate,

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[115] Although refugees are not legally allowed to own land in Uganda, some work around this by having an unregistered family member, for example, the husband, as the landowner. This has, for the most part, been limited to those with relatively high income. As this suggests, in the town, commercial opportunities and need to secure additional sources of income can prevail over land anxieties. A South Sudanese man from Eastern Equatoria whose father purchased a plot of land in Ewuta in 2018, 'It was not difficult for my father to acquire land as South Sudanese. On the contrary, in Arua people prefer selling land to foreigners because they will get more money than selling to the nationals' (I-74).

[116] See Actogether, 2010.

foreigners more, and this is done secretly' (I-118). Though, too, landlords were likely to charge Ugandan tenants from other parts of Uganda more than Lugbara tenants.

Dynamic and contestable degrees of insider status imbue social emplacement and financial calculations. At times, people articulated this as a necessary protective measure. Landlords claimed that South Sudanese families did not look after their properties well, so they felt justified in adding a surcharge to compensate for the perceived risk of damage. Others more openly admitted that they saw it as an opportunity to capitalise on the perceived wealth of South Sudanese people. Higher charges against South Sudanese tenants indicate that the landlord-tenant relationship is a financial relation of accumulation. Landlords have complex moral postures towards inclusive pricing. As Jafar explained, 'The truth is you cannot help a foreigner the same way you help your own brother or local here. They say charity begins at home. When you do not leave food at home and people starve, you will not achieve what you want because of a lack of blessings from home; therefore, rent charged to an Indian cannot be the same as that of a local' (I-9).

The distribution of refugee households largely plays out along linguistically affiliated lines, though not exclusively. In part, this reflects the kin and friendship-based networks used to identify suitable locations. This is, in turn, amplified by the dynamics of refuge in Uganda, which play out broadly along 'ethnic' determinations of bureaucratic settlement in the camp. The process of locating an initial household in Arua can involve extensive network usage. Very often, the person behind the decision to move will use whatever social connections they have to examine possible options. Those with relatives able and willing to share their space might offer a first resting point. Some rely on brokers who, for a fee, will support this process.

There are concentrations of particular populations near the churches detailed in Chapter 5. Areas with long histories of drawing diverse populations have continued to do so – many South Sudanese households are located in areas such as Oli Division within the Central Business District, which has a relatively low-cost rental market and is close to vital city services. Within the city, the range of available housing varies dramatically. Certain areas are known for larger, gated, single-household compounds; others are subdivided into semi-permanent structures, and many are let on a per-room basis. Those with the means to do so seek out tiled, gated,

permanent housing with power. Others make do with cramped conditions in grass-thatched housing or incomplete temporary structures, relying on shared facilities. Ultimately, the tenancy will be determined by availability, personal preference, and access to resources. Having found a potential home, tenants negotiate and secure the terms of the tenancy. Though some were able to produce written documentation, by and large, these remained verbal contracts.

New entrants to an area are supposed to register themselves with the LCI. A Ugandan landlord described, 'it's a common thing here to let the authorities know about your coming' (I-12). Registration with LCs was, however, minimally enforced and depended on the activity levels of the LCI in each area. Landlords would sometimes facilitate this introduction as an act of witness for the contract (in turn, providing themselves with protection in case of disputes). However, it was not a standard practice. As one landlord described, 'The LC introduces them in writing, and I have copies so that when you have issues or conflicts with them, you can go to the LC. In fact, LCs will be willing to know how they arrived in Arua and what they are doing… they are strict… they are supposed to be registered, starting with local authorities up to the security people like the Resident City Commissioner' (I-8). South Sudanese residents, however, indicated on many occasions that they were unaware of who the LC was for their area and felt that there was nothing to be gained from introducing themselves. Given the lack of recognition granted to non-citizen populations in the urban arena, if their landlord did not encourage them to contact the LC, South Sudanese tended only to engage the LC when required, for example, when a household member needed a letter of introduction for proof of residence. Moreover, though not all LCs would charge for their services, landlords and tenants alike noted that LCs often expected to be paid for fulfilling their role as a standing witness. These fees varied according to the demands of the LCs. In 2018, in Ediofe, the LCI charged 100,000 UGX for South Sudanese households and only 10,000 UGX for Ugandan households.[117]

Payments and agreements about deposits were arbitrarily enforced and declared. Landlords would sometimes require more than three months' payment upon the initial tenancy agreement. The exact amount, timing and mode of payment varied. Payments could be made by mobile

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[117] Storer, personal correspondence.

money or in person, rarely for my interlocutors, by bank transfer. Some landlords kept a ledger, yet miscommunication about payments was relatively common. The Landlord and Tenant Act 2022 regulates the conduct of landlords by stipulating the terms of engagement with their tenants, including limiting changes to the rental payments and specifying an appropriate notice period for evictions. Prior to this, there was minimal oversight or legal regulation of the landlord-tenant relationship. Nonetheless, the formal stipulations of the new act were weakly deployed and largely unenforced during the period of data collection.[118] Even rental properties linked to major local politicians continued to be let in the absence of formal documentation or recourse to the standards outlined in the 2022 Act.

Moral ordering

Among the many potential sources of tension between tenants and their neighbours or landlords were occupancy rates, hygiene concerns, relations with surrounding community members and domestic disputes. Tenancy occupations, much like land ownership claims, are too shaped by complex social and moral registers which seek to regulate the character and social capabilities of neighbours, tenants, and landlords in the urban environment. This was made apparent through the repeated emphasis of landlords on the importance of their tenants' character, underscoring how housing is not just a material arrangement but also a moral terrain.

Within these dynamics, South Sudanese tenants are frequently othered in ways that reflect deeper anxieties about the social and spatial proximity of strangers. Their presence in urban neighbourhoods was often framed through generalised narratives of disorder and excess, particularly concerning household size and behaviour. These tensions are not merely personal but embedded in broader struggles over resource distribution, space, and the implicit norms governing how one should stay with others. The City sanitation officer, who was also a tenant and neighbour of South Sudanese families, reflected: 'Where I am, sometimes they are so chaotic among themselves. Always quarrelling, shouting, fighting. It is quite stressful' (I-117). Such accounts reflect how domestic life becomes a focal point for exclusionary practices, reinforcing

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[118] At the time of my research, NRC were undertaking a major information drive regarding legal housing protection in Arua City. The programme focused on utilising existing community spaces as a platform for advocacy for heightened awareness of and reliance on legal bounds.

social boundaries under the guise of everyday grievance. He continued: 'There are complaints, especially from property owners, especially landlords. When [South Sudanese] are looking for a safe space to let, property owners say they spoil people's buildings. People say they [referring to South Sudanese people] are very unhygienic and all of that. You see many people packed. Yet this is also because they have failed to get a place to let' (I-117). Though occupancy rates of houses were a key source of tension, few landlords recognised the underlying drivers of these patterns of occupation. As detailed in Chapter 6, oftentimes, tenants will make their urban homes available to friends, families, or kin networks as a base from which to access safety, security, educational opportunities, and alternative healthcare options beyond the confines of the settlement.

Landlords narrated multiple complexities associated with dense populations, pointing, for example, to the limitations of the utility infrastructures, avoiding 'congestion' in their properties such that 'facilities like latrines cannot fill very fast' (I-4). One landlord, who had previously rented two of the four two-room structures available in his compound in Pajulu to South Sudanese households, narrated: 'South Sudanese have large families. The houses are not enough to accommodate them. The landlord will ask how many family members you have… but really you find there are eight or ten and the beds are in the sitting room. The second family I rented to told me there were only three of them, but there were nine' (I-95). These perceptions fed into narratives of overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions. Hygiene concerns and pressure on shared utilities often became flashpoints for tension. Yet, as the city health inspector, Robert, pointed out, these were as much failures of infrastructure as they were issues of behaviour: South Sudanese households were frequently blamed for poor sanitation when landlords themselves had failed to provide adequate facilities for wastewater disposal (I-117). In this way, refugees were scapegoated for structural neglect. In this sense, Ugandan landlords positioned South Sudanese families as scapegoats. Several landlords disparagingly repeated the rumour that Dinka and Nuer households would carve holes into the ground to enable them to play a game (mancala).

These narratives are reflective of wider cautionary moral logics, which are situated with reference to diverse outsiders. Strangers, in this sense, are identified as sources of instability and disorder. South Sudanese people are linked to unruly behaviours, disease (including COVID-19) and direct violence. Robert continued, 'There is a lot of dirty water being generated and creating a lot

of sanitation-related nuisances. All the blame goes to South Sudanese households, but this is a structural issue. The landlord did not provide the facilities for them to manage… Later on, the landlord understood, worked on the problem, and the family has remained there... the way that the community handles the issue with refugees is always more harsh than it is to a national' (I-117). This differential treatment exposes how refugee presence is managed not only through bureaucratic governance but also through informal moral economies that police the social and spatial boundaries of inclusion.

Recognising that in the absence of strong pro-poor state infrastructures, multiple actors claim and practice public authority (Lund, 2006; Migdal and Schlichte, 2005), it is critical for the way the city governance infrastructures seek to manage and control populations. The engagement of bureaucrats, politicians, and neighbours in the materiality, use and inhabitancy of the home further unpacks the importance of situating Arua in its longer durée. These efforts align with broader order-making practices rooted in collective survival and the informal management of scarcity. The home is not merely a private dwelling but a social space subject to intense scrutiny, where moral judgements about cleanliness, behaviour, and relationality are enacted. These everyday forms of moral ordering determine who is deemed to belong and who is excluded from social protection.

South Sudanese refugees, already othered in the wider urban imagination, often face intensified forms of this regulation. Anxiety around such interventions was widespread. Several refugees expressed a strong preference for forms of material enclosure as a strategy of social and spatial defence. For those who could afford it, the construction of compound walls was not just about physical protection—it was an architectural assertion of social boundaries. As one woman explained, the walls were vital in keeping her grandchildren within the compound and avoiding trouble with neighbours (I-185). This desire for enclosure reflects an everyday politics of boundary-making, where the architecture of the home mediates moral and social legibility. People are differentially empowered to mobilise moral norms in their favour; those unable to perform an accepted or recognisable form of 'upright personhood' often find themselves caught in cycles of social neglect. Ironically, it is precisely this neglect that can deepen the very behaviours deemed undesirable, reinforcing the logics of exclusion.

These moral economies have direct implications for processes of eviction and dehoming. Many of the South Sudanese households I came across were between four and six months behind on their rental payments. Despite this widespread economic precarity, the enforcement of tenancy agreements was far from uniform. South Sudanese tenants appeared to be in continual negotiation with landlords. The process of eviction was often drawn out and deeply relational, shaped by informal negotiations rather than strict legal enforcement. While some landlords demanded rent months in advance, others allowed arrears to accumulate before eventually requesting payment. These dynamics highlight the fluid and contingent nature of tenancy, where economic arrangements are filtered through interpersonal relations and moral appraisals. In the following case, I examine how processes of eviction are negotiated and deferred.

Refugee rentals and indebtedness

In June 2022, Nyanreng was living in a rented home in Ediofe with nine children in her care. Sitting on the porch of her two-room house, she breastfed her youngest child while narrating her experiences of leaving South Sudan, trouble in the camp and then life in Arua. She narrated in Nuer, 'life at home [in South Sudan] is the best. At our home, you can cultivate and rear animals. You can do whatever you want because it is your homeland. What you have there you do not buy… but when the conflict came, I was staying in the village so I could hide from the fighting. I was so deep in the village, but because of the flooding, I had nowhere left to hide. I cannot go back because everything is devastated there – there is no school, no healthcare' (I-63). She arrived in Uganda in 2021 and registered in Rhino camp, where she remained for just a few months. Her husband, who stays in Akobo, a small South Sudanese town on the eastern border with Ethiopia, was not working and could not send money to support them. When her brother, a businessman in Juba, offered to support them financially and relocate them to Arua, Nyanreng approached a broker based in Arua. The broker found them this house in Ediofe, a twenty-minute walk from the central market. The Ugandan landowner spent most of his time in DRC, where he was working. The walled and gated compound contained several rooms split into four rental units positioned around the perimeter of a small, paved area.

The agreed monthly fee for the two-room unit was 500,000 UGX. With four children enrolled in school at that time, she relied on GFA from the camp as a source of additional income for essential purchases. By June 2022, she was four months behind on the rent – her brother had
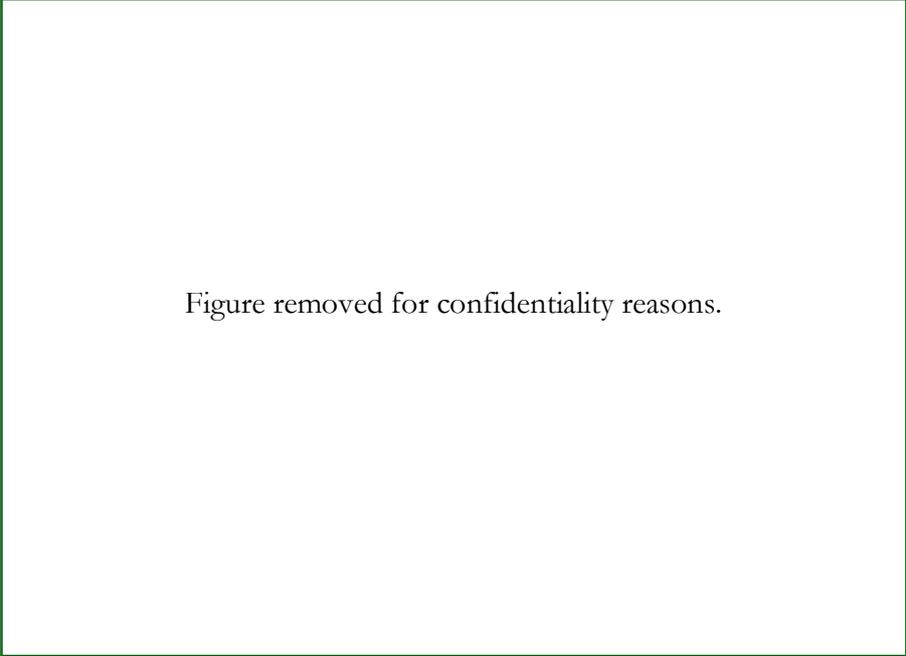
Figure removed for confidentiality reasons.

Figure 20 - Rental housing in Ediofe. Source: Brown, 2022.

not sent enough money for the rent in several months. Her landlord was threatening them with eviction. She was supposed to pay the outstanding balance by the end of the month, but she had not been able to secure the money from her brother. She told her landlord that her brother's phone was off – she was still waiting to hear the landlord's decision.

Six months later, in December 2022, Nyanreng was still living in the home. Her landlord had since installed a sign above the two-room residence (see Figure 20). The sign read 'welcome // when you pay the first of the month and reach the 30th, you are urged to pay immediately, or you are given 3 days. If you fail you will be released on the 4th day'. Nyanreng and her family were living, quite literally, under the threat of eviction. Yet, they had not yet been evicted. In an attempt to pacify their landlord, her brother had cleared some of the debt. They remained in a back-and-forth negotiation with their landlord. When they remained only one month behind on their rental payments, her landlord detained their household items. Nyanreng communicated a sense that the landlord was growing less patient with their delays. 'Even last month, before we paid, he first locked all the doors, and later, he opened them when we paid'.

Once again, on the cusp of eviction, as Nyanreng explained, 'I do not really know what the decision will be tomorrow because we even gave my brother's phone number to the landlord.

He tried to call him, but his phone was unreachable.' By sharing her brother's phone number with the landlord, she was able to deflect immediate responsibility for the debt to the 'responsible person'. She was effectively renegotiating the terms of the landlord's demands. Nyanreng's deft deferral of the moment of eviction represents a highly gendered staying power. By asserting a lack of responsibility for the tenancy payment, she managed to redirect the landlord's attention beyond the immediate space of the home. The issue of 'responsibility' concerns the ownership of a situation of struggle in a given moment and speaks to the shared social expectations around this.

However, this remarkable staying power despite evident financial precarity meant that eviction threats could linger for many months. As urban scholars, Garboden and Rosen (2019) observe that while researchers have richly accounted for the deleterious effects of actually executed evictions, there has been less attention to the pernicious effects of threats of eviction. Though they draw on examples of highly formalised and state-supported threats from three cities in the US, their notion of contingent tenure draws important attention to the ontological insecurity resulting for those living under the threat of eviction. Their precarity and sense of being out of place are internalised, anticipated, and minimised, producing stress and relational complications. An inability to communicate with the 'responsible person', whether resulting from deliberate evasion or coincidence, can also be a source of great stress, keeping a resolution out of reach. The resulting delay in the decision bought the family a few vital extra days. 'Even if [the landlord] chased us tomorrow, we shall have nowhere to go because we do not have money to board a vehicle to Rhino camp. We shall first sit outside.'

As this case illustrates, the temporalities of eviction in Arua vary drastically. Though failure to pay rent is a direct assault on the viability of the residence, it is often highly negotiable in practice. The seemingly unpredictable back-and-forth negotiations between Nyanreng and her landlord point to an important process infused with contingent dynamics of power between South Sudanese tenants and landlords in Arua. The landlord-tenant relationship between Nyanreng and her landlord was marked by inequality and intense ambiguity. Looking beyond simplistic ideas of landlords as villains of capital extraction in the urban arena, landlords emerge as vanguards of protection and harm for South Sudanese households.

Moral negotiations of homing and dehoming

Though there is no guaranteed outcome for these processes of contestation, there is an evident disjuncture between the processes and the moment of eviction. Rather than a demonstration of active resistance, tenant households engaged in subtle contestations – a restrained negotiation of presence revolving around seemingly perpetual cycles of falling into arrears and being pressured by their landlords. Tenants explained the sources of their woes to their landlords: delays to monthly payments by government employers (Machol, 2022); impassable communication with their guarantors in the form of 'network problems' and unreliable husbands. At times, landlords were willing to engage with the conditions of payment delay, and others actively sought to help their tenants by providing material support. Gifting food items was one common form of exchange. For example, Mary's landlady would bring food for the children to help bridge the gap between distribution day at the settlement, on the unspoken condition that the rent would be the first priority to be cleared upon receiving the rations (I-55). These acts thereby demonstrate a degree of mutuality and care, but networks of reciprocity offer a safety net, but also material and social obligations. When asked why they would allow someone who had failed to pay their rent to stay, as Jafar, a landlord with multiple properties, narrated, 'There are some Tenants who are just good. This is not based on how well the person pays rent, but how the person relates to you, the landlord' (I-9). As he suggests, concerns about the social characters of the tenants and the moral ramifications of their enterprise intervene in their business decisions.

These concerns with interdependence are historically situated within the uneasy and often hostile relationship with the national state. By acknowledging the shared moral locus of inclusion in the community, landlords such as Jafar defer to a sense of communal struggle. In this way, processes of dehoming were tightly embedded in moral and social norms: 'I believe once you rent out your premises to a tenant and evict them unnecessarily, it can become a curse to you when they feel mistreated... Right now, there are some who have not paid rent for four to five months, but they are still here... I believe that when you help people, God can bless you in other ways. You know life is not easy, so it is very important to understand your tenants and help where necessary' (I-9). This landlord expressed the dangers of ruthless capital extraction, instead arguing in favour of relational obligations, even to the stranger, in shared circumstances of widespread financial precarity.

This reflects an archive of knowledge locating stability in relations of community interdependence. For example, Storer (2020, p. 79) locates the internal basis for structures of self-reliance among Lugbara peoples within the 'community' forged in lieu of state support or 'external' humanitarian interventions. In contrast to contemporary organisational definitions of self-reliance, which are defined in terms of dependence on the state/donor-funded agencies and individualised self-reliance, poverty (alio) in this setting is defined as both an absence of people and material resources. In the contemporary setting, this provides a useful anchor for reframing the notion of reliance on emic terms. To illustrate this, among Jieng-speaking refugee populations, self-reliance is translated as raan ci rot leu. This loosely translates to someone who has no problem, someone who is 'stable' and does not need help from anybody. The idea of being 'self-reliant' is imbued with negative connotations. Someone perceived to be staying without the community, in relationships of advice receiving, might be asked, 'Why do you do things this way as if you have no problems?' The implication is that you are managing your affairs to the extent that you have detached from important relational ties, as though you do not need help or advice from others. This is associated with negative behaviours – wealth is often perceived as detrimental to relational connections. Correspondingly, poverty, ngong, is defined dualistically - ngong koc (when you do not have many people, for example, few people in your clan) and ngong kang (a lack of material wealth).

When this data is mapped in relation to the historical and social milieux of the region, it can be usefully built upon to expand geographical and sociological knowledge on processes of urbanisation and change as they relate to life in displacement. These anxieties are not new—they have long been refracted through the urban arena as it draws diverse populations into new spatial and relational configurations. Under customary land tenure systems, mobility has historically been associated with the potential transgression of known moral communities (Allen, 1993, pp. 367–70; Leonardi et al., 2021, p. 7). Leonardi et al. argue that such unease is often amplified by bureaucratic and administrative interventions, which recalibrate the boundaries of legitimacy and belonging. The temporal, spatial, and economic viability of residence has, in this context, always been mediated by malleable social solidarities. As Leonardi et al. (2021, p. 1) suggest, evictions are not only economic or legal events but also sites of moral boundary-making, especially in contexts shaped by migration and cross-border movements. These dynamics are

discursively and epistemologically negotiated over time, reflecting the unstable and negotiated nature of propertied relations. At the micro-level, the rigidity of broad stereotypes often gives way to more granular and context-sensitive narratives. Interpersonal relations are shaped less by abstract ethnic or national identities and more by assessments of individual character and the ability to 'stay well with others'. Morality, in this sense, becomes a flexible script—one that can be reflexively adjusted to redraw the lines of inclusion and exclusion as circumstances demand. As Storer (2020) argues in relation to Lugbarati-speaking communities, such moral repertoires are often rooted in lived experience, including memories of violence and encounters with state authority. These 'internal' moral scripts are not static; they are actively produced and negotiated through interactions with diverse actors, institutions, and spatial practices. In this way, the regulation of urban space—and the everyday governance of displacement—cannot be understood without reference to the moral economies that underpin them.

If the tenant is unable to 'stay well with people' they may also be held accountable. Similarly, landlords must also exercise caution and patience – even in cases of property damage – to retain one's moral standing, one cannot be perceived as a bad landlord. Moreover, as a landlord connected to the place where your property is, you are placed in a position of responsibility vis-à-vis the rest of the community. As Jafar put it, 'Even if someone pays rent on time, but in times of difficulties does not stand with you, they are not a good person. You know, a person who does not relate well with you makes it difficult to help them when they need your help… There are also tenants whose character is generally not fine, such as a person who causes quarrels with other tenants and uses abusive language with fellow tenants. Such a person gives a bad name to you, the landlord. Therefore, the only solution is to evict such a person' (I-9). The undesirable characters of tenants can also prompt eviction, even when the tenant pays rent in a timely manner. Outcomes of an individual landlord-tenant negotiation seemed to be defined by a sense of the landlord's concern with moral standing and fears of community condemnation, as much as the enforcement of the terms of the contract.

Incorporation within the community is, therefore, to some extent, dependent on one's ability to exist within this shared moral fabric. The boundaries of community have long been drawn by treating those on the outside with caution. Outsiders, and indeed insiders who move beyond the spatial and moral limits of the community, are variously associated with disease, disorder, and

accumulation (Leonardi *et al.,* 2021; Middleton, 1960a, b; Leopold, 2005; Allen, 1997, 2007; Storer and Pearson, 2019; Storer *et al.,* 2022; Meagher, 1990; Titeca, 2009; Schomerus, 2008; Schomerus and Titeca, 2012; Storer, 2020). These powerful moral principles are therefore also about exclusion and the uneven accumulation of power and resources. For example, Middleton (1960) examines notions of respect, which emerge as hierarchical obligations to others. Similarly, Allen (1993) details how persons suspected of being witches become vectors for outside dangers to penetrate the community, engendering violent forms of social upheaval. Accordingly, the forms of mutuality that enable these relational obligations and result in particular moral terrains can also be expressly violent (Storer *et al.*, 2017).

At a more immediate level, exposure to landlords varied greatly – those who lived on shared properties engaged more readily with their tenants. This could also become a source of stress in cases of delayed payment. Meanwhile, landlords located further afield were harder to track down, but equally, were a less present form of stress and anxiety in case of delays to payment. If the landlord was not themselves located in Arua, they might deputise someone to manage the tenancy. Landlords use a diverse range of tactics when trying to prompt payment. Those who stayed beyond the confines of the compound would rely primarily on phone calls and home visitations. More extreme measures included locking people out and/or detaining their property. The range of options available to tenants and landlords alike is linked closely to fear and the obsolescence of the legal system. Locking people out and arbitrary detention of property are extra-legal activities which can bring the otherwise slow temporalities of removal into sharp focus, forcing tenants to act. After accumulating six months of unpaid rental fees, 500,000 UGX per month for two bedrooms and a sitting room in a shared compound, Nyamouc, who was staying in Oli with her family of six, found herself locked out in 2020. She had been staying in the home for a year and a half. Her husband had lost his job, and she had no other way to earn money. After being locked out for two days, she narrated that her community and church members contributed 1,000,000 UGX to the landlord to alleviate the debt. The landlord, who stayed in the same compound, opened the house again for a few months. In this way, the tenant can suture the breakdown in the relationship, clearing enough of the debt to 'cool the landlord's temperature'. Nonetheless, as for Nyamouc, without a wider change in circumstances, this delays the seemingly inevitable moment of eviction. As Nyamouc described, 'after it reached the same

six again, he got annoyed and threw my belongings out and told me to leave his house' (I-61). As this example indicates, these are often untidy processes of removal.

Not all landlords had the option to respond flexibly to the conditions of delay. When asked about the conditions for evictions, Jafar continued, 'A landlord has the right to evict any tenant who fails to pay rent…Other cases, like needing to renovate a house, can lead to eviction' (I-9). Many landlords will take on debts to finance their investments, which can shape the trajectory of the negotiations, as Ayiik experienced: 'I was evicted in the current house. We got locked out twice. In the first place, the landlady took some loans with the national revenue authority and told them all the money for renting her house would be paid directly to them, so after spending some time without paying, the national revenue authority came with their padlock and locked the house with all my belongings inside. I had to call my husband and give the phone to the National Revenue Authority, and he told them that he would pay their money tomorrow, and from there, they unlocked the house. The following day, my husband borrowed some money in South Sudan and sent it to pay for the rent' (I-65). Propertied relations of capital accumulation imply vast inequalities, but these notions often come undone in this context. The landlord can also, therefore, be understood as contingently situated, a private property owner who might also be ensnared in indebtedness.

Landlords' simultaneous enmeshment in adjacent economic, social, and political networks also impacted their decision-making. Sitting on the concrete verge of the rental property, a broken-down vehicle merging with the overgrowth where the plot met the roadside, a tenant in Junior Quarters explained their fractious dynamic with their landlord. The landlord, who shared the compound with them, locked the family out of their house after accumulating four months of unpaid rent. The family, having nowhere to go, stayed on the grassy area in front of the house until evening. Having locked them out, the landlord eventually relented - he 'allowed us back in because he feared being held responsible in case they locked us out and something happened to us at night' (I-163). These dynamics highlight the complex social roles played by landlords. They are enmeshed in local social networks, bound by a sense of reciprocity. They also assume a position of responsibility for their tenants.

However, the dynamics of power are deeply embedded in the landlord-tenant relationship - overt displays of force in the process of removal are minimised. The moment of departure from the house is typically prompted either by a tenant being locked out by their landlord or, as is more often the case, the tenants will peacefully, albeit reluctantly, leave their homes. They are wary that they have little recourse to resist. Indicative of this, not one case of physical violence was reported. Tenants who have resided in the houses on borrowed time are generally accepting of their position, displaying sympathy for the financial positions of their landlords. Abuk, a woman staying on the south side of the city, was paying 150,000 UGX per month for two grass-thatched houses. Sixteen people were relying on these houses, one of which was without a roof. Abuk noted, 'My landlord came last week asking for money, but he got me when I was so sick. From there, he felt so bad and left, telling me I should first get better. But now nothing has changed, so he told me to pay the money bit by bit as I get some money. He is a very good landlord. I have been here in his house since 2014. During Covid-19, he used to bring us food and even firewood... our neighbours were complaining about us, but he is supporting us. He told them that life in South Sudan is not good... Now, he is increasing the price. I told him I had no more money or energy to pay. I have not paid for seven months, but he does not quarrel... I think we will all go to the camp when one of the children has completed P7' (I-58). While extractive accumulation works in the landlords' favour, it should be noted that many of the landlords in question are dividing plots to cater for school fees and to generate income sources when lacking alternative choices. Households who are eventually evicted tend to submit peacefully to the landlord's desire for them to leave, recognising that they have not upheld their end of the agreement.

For those who seek to remain in the city, relocation to a cheaper house is the first port of call. When her landlord evicted her, Nyamuoc relocated within Oli. She explained, 'I went to one of my friends and hosted for three days, and I talked to the current landlord, who gave me the room we are staying in now. I entered the house without paying, but he understood me. As per now, the current landlord is demanding seven months' unpaid rent, and I am supposed to be paying 70,000 UGX per month. That reaches 490,000' (I-61). As seen here, financial precarity can be a persistent experience for those remaining in the city. Brokers similarly report high degrees of flux as Ugandan and South Sudanese households alike are priced out of more

desirable areas of town (I-105). For precariously situated city residents, this leads to a constant sense of having to start over, a loss of fragile and nascent friendships and social ties (Elliott-Cooper *et al.*, 2019). Practices of borrowing and sharing that come to buffer against the temporal inconsistencies of having to make ends meet must be rebuilt anew. Depending on the extent of relocation, tenants may have to find new schools, new school fees, new boda drivers, and new marketplaces. Given the primacy of social networks – formed on the move and in displacement (Stites *et al.*, 2021), this is a loss of invaluable knowledge and relational capital.

Crucially, as noted in the rich literature above, these moral tapestries are woven and re-stitched with and through state interventions. An important and largely unaddressed question remains: How do these uneven moral logics play out in relationship to the humanitarian infrastructure?

Institutional abandonment

At the point of eviction, the stark abandonment by institutions is once again laid bare. In Arua, Nyawic supported herself and six children using food rations and the contributions of her husband, who was on a temporary contract. She was residing in a shared compound with a monthly rent of rent at 130,000 UGX. In August 2022, five months in arrears, she called her landlady and informed her that her husband's contract had ended. She narrated that although the organisation he was working for had promised to call him back, they never did. She informed the landlord that she needed to leave the house and return to the camp. However, when the NRC paralegal followed up with OPM to seek support for this relocation, she was rebuffed. The official stance maintained by staff of the OPM office in Arua is that, 'If you got yourself to town, it is up to you to get yourself back to the settlement'. In a stakeholder meeting later convened by NRC in October 2022 (O-5), a representative OPM staff member further clarified, 'You [refugees] have a right to move and stay anywhere, but the movement has to be documented'. In other words, without evidence that a specific household has secured formal permission to leave the settlement, OPM openly state that they will not be helped to return. To give clarity on the scale of this issue, reflecting on the issue of formal approval for residing beyond their registered settlement, an LCI who was present in the meeting shared that in his cell in Oli, 'Noone has papers completely. Yet, if you are transporting the cow, the cow will have a document. But for them [the refugees] completely nothing.'

Nyawic relied on a transfer of assets from her home village to facilitate their transport: 'My biological mother sold one cow in the village and sent me the money to use for transport back to the camp' (I-62). Now residing in the settlement, Nyawic still owes the landlady 650,000 UGX. To guarantee the debt Nyawic's landlady requested that she leave one bed and mattress in the rental property, 'I will collect my things when I get her money'. Nonetheless, it is unclear what landlords gained by holding onto these properties – there is little momentum behind their removal or their collection.

Nyawic's story points to a wider pattern whereby financially unstable South Sudanese families in town are forced to sell key assets to facilitate their return to the camp – for example, mattresses, cooking equipment, bed frames, or borrow, leading to further social and economic indebtedness.[119] Okello described how things have unfolded for his family: 'I had some cash, so I went to Kampala to buy a grinding mill in 2016. Then, I rented a house. My wife and children were in Arua, and [at that time] I was volunteering for CARE. But it was very difficult to make something during Corona, so I brought them back to the settlement. I have no plans to send them back' (I-118). Building on these examples, the following case further examines the complex dynamics of dispossession in displacement. Tracing the story of one family from the settlement to Arua and back again, their story reveals how displacement and dispossession collide and unfold not as a singular rupture but as a series of compounded disruptions. The case illustrates how repeat dispossession is brought about by the intersecting forces of poverty and institutional neglect.

Nyandeng is a South Sudanese woman in her late 40s who registered as a refugee in RCS. All of Nyandeng's property was stolen during the September 2020 attack. Deciding she could no longer stay in the camp, she asked a driver to take her and her six children to Arua. Upon reaching Arua, she sold the UNHCR logo-emblazoned plastic sheet she had used as a roof in the camp.

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[119] The paths of individuals often differ to those of whole households. For young men, typically the most agile and unencumbered group, they must rely on social networks, rendering themselves useful to a household to secure their lodgings. Faced with pressure to earn and contribute to secure their own financial future, many return to Juba, where they live at the will of the household to which they attach themselves. Taking up residence with relatives or friends. Nor are these linear processes, relying on the goodwill and generosity of friends and relatives is replete with social obligations and compromise.

She received 45,000 UGX for the sheet from a trader in the central market. She used the money to pay the driver. She then moved into the rental property where her niece was living. From September 2020 to 2021, her niece's husband worked to pay for the property. She used the money she collected from the monthly food rations in the settlement for their subsistence in town. 'All the time I was in town, my children never went to school because I could not pay their school fees. Even feeding alone was a problem, sometimes the children slept without food' (I-64).

When her niece's husband lost his job, her niece went back to South Sudan. Nyandeng remained in Arua. Using the money she received from the distribution, she rented a two-bedroom house and paid for one month in advance. Unable to afford both food and rent, she fell five months behind on her rent. She narrated, 'The landlady was annoyed and chased me out with my children. She gave me a week to look for money, but I had no solution. [The landlady] even entered the house, threw all my things out, including the furniture, and locked the door, leaving us outside. My children were so upset, they were crying ... The only person who helped was the driver... I told him to take us on loan, and I would look for his money... even up to now, the landlord and the driver are still chasing for their money'.

Back in the settlement, six months after leaving Arua, Nyandeng and her family lived in Tika 4A. Initially, they had found shelter in a Seventh-day Adventist church. However, the congregation soon grew tired of moving the family's things in and out every time there was a service and asked them to vacate the church. Having nowhere else to go, the family lived in a small, flimsy structure 50 meters from the church. As can be seen in Figure 21, the structure's base was made of wattle, and the roof was made of two UNHCR 'carpets,' which Nyandeng bought using the money she received during the monthly cash distribution. The structure would regularly become waterlogged, unable to withstand the force of the rain. Cattle belonging to neighbouring Ugandans grazed on the grass around their shelter and the church. Nyandeng lamented, 'I am not preparing to grow crops this year because of stray animals. My crops will never be able to grow, and it was causing problems between me and the owners of the animals since the animals stray and eat people's crops. Last year, stray animals from the host community destroyed my crops. I am not repeating the same mistake this year. I reported the case to the Tika police post

last year, but they did not take any action.' Showing her refugee identification documents, she noted that they incorrectly recorded her name during registration. It has never been amended.

Figure 21 - A makeshift shelter in Tika, improvised in the wake of repeat evictions. Source: Brown, 2022.

Her appeals were met with silence or indifference, revealing the limits of local refugee governance structures in responding to acute instances of vulnerability. A paralegal representing the Norwegian Refugee Council was also contacted but failed to follow through. According to his colleagues, he was known for his lack of engagement and rarely pursued cases with any vigour. Representatives from UNHCR, meanwhile, were reportedly unaware of the family's situation altogether. Back in the settlement, Nyandeng and her family found themselves unrecognised, unassisted, and ultimately excluded.

Eventually, Nyandeng and her eldest child began to rebuild. With no institutional support, they constructed a makeshift shelter using poles, grass, and materials sourced from the surrounding environment. Her fifteen-year-old son ventured into the bush to cut poles, while Nyandeng gathered the grass. The cost of survival, however, extended beyond shelter. Nyandeng's son left

school to help sustain the family. At the age of fifteen, he took up informal work, tending to animals in exchange for small payments. His modest income was directed toward covering the Parent-Teacher Association fees—14,000 UGX per term—so that his younger siblings might continue their education. Still, hunger frequently kept the children home from school. These decisions—between education and survival, between shelter and nourishment—reveal the impossible choices displaced families must navigate daily. Nyandeng's story makes visible the everyday labour of sustaining life at the edges of a system that too often fails to see or respond.

Displacements

Housing insecurity has come under increased theoretical and empirical scrutiny in the last two decades. The central theoretical gist problematises the role of capital in producing extractive systems of accumulation from shelter. This claim is developed through ethnographic texts, which critically examine how these processes insert themselves into the intimate lives of tenants, homeowners, communities, and wider socio-economic and political systems (Desmond, 2012, 2016; Soederberg, 2018). The implication is that the slow creep of capital into housing markets is, in turn, undermining the viability of fixed residences. Evictions are no longer seen as the ultimate climax of poverty but rather as part of a reciprocal and dialectical relationship between poverty and housing insecurity. Desmond's work, in particular, has significantly influenced critical examinations of evictions as commonplace violent processes affecting the urban poor, with myriad consequences for health and educational outcomes.

A rich theoretical engagement with housing insecurity across the Global South predates this work (Weinstein, 2021). This literature has mostly focused on capital cities, urban redevelopment, and coordinated protest against mass evictions (Otiso, 2002; Searle, 2016; Gherter, 2011). As Yiftachel suggests, there is much to understand about the divergent ways that processes of dehoming play out beyond Euro-American literature, particularly for contexts that do not rely on 'orderly land and housing systems, a stable rule of law, and central role of urban planning' (2020, p. 156). There remains a need for broader, more diverse accounting to produce a 'global sociology of evictions' (Weinstein, 2021), which allows for overlaps, tensions, and variation across settings (see, for example, Brickell *et al.,* 2017). This must also account for the divergent logics of border making, which often include epistemologies which differ from rational-legal frameworks (Leonardi *et al.,* 2021; Titeca, 2012).

It is clear from these accounts that capitalist narratives of rentals and evictions elsewhere are unable to account for the specific logic of expulsion playing out in Uganda's periphery. This examination of dehoming provides a different conceptual grammar through which to examine the frequencies of injustice. Nyandeng and her family have experienced multiple displacements. Removal emerges as the silent foundation of self-reliance - the result of social and bureaucratic abandonment. A deep sense of loss accompanied each departure and removal. Within the private property framework, South Sudanese persons are subject to market logic, precariously balanced in stretched relations of financial dependence, with important implications for the viability of 'self-reliance' in the urban setting. In turn, the bureaucratic violence of the camp emerges in sharp precision: beyond the emergency phase, families must carve out their own spaces in contexts of material abandonment. Ultimately, self-reliance is a temporally fixed figment disconnected from the realities of everyday life in the post-colonial state periphery.

When situated in its wider historical context, notions of moral personhood and shared social ordering emerge prominently in the wider fabric of governance in the periphery (Storer, 2020). In Arua, property relations are intimately entangled with social interdependency, which extends far beyond the private property relationship. This interdependency plays out through registers of tension around the 'stranger' and social solidarities as they have been formed through longer histories of colonial and post-colonial statehood in the border region. In this way, there are grounds to view evictions from a perspective emphasising the formation of moral and social solidarities and dissonance as a key factor in housing outcomes. Evictions in this context can only be understood in relation to the diverse tenure regimes that underpin the homing processes within Arua's rural hinterland. Nonetheless, the pace of dispossession in Arua is propelled by and intertwined with capital accumulation and class struggle.

Literature produced from settings in the Global South has situated evictions in relation to slum clearance and aesthetic redevelopments of the urban (Agbola and Jinadu, 1997). By contrast, this data speaks to different processes of bureaucratic abandonment that play out in conversation with humanitarian infrastructures. As this chapter has argued, the dynamics of negotiation and self-reliance, or mutual dependence, have developed in response to isolation and institutional abandonment. Landlords are placed in positions of authority but also carry responsibility in complex relations of care. The jostling within and around shared moral ordering produces highly

contingent arrangements and shows how humanitarian actors of one of the most visible displacement architectures in the world abandon refugees.

Conclusion

Housing is one useful medium through which to trace registers of injustice. This chapter has relied on thick descriptions of the negotiations and processes surrounding removal. It has shown that non-citizen populations are unevenly enrolled in the local housing infrastructure in Arua, which operates through the overlapping terrains of profit-making and extraction, as well as moral and social claims. It argues for an understanding of housing as mediated by relations beyond property markets and legal protections. In many ways, social relations form the core safety net for mitigating financial pressures. Yet many of these social relations fundamentally rely on situational spatial configurations - the destabilisation of spatial relations enacted by the moment of eviction decimates the relational ties that make the city viable. The viability of urban inhabitance within Arua thus needs to be understood as a constantly shifting social fact. Building up from this perspective allows for a grounded assessment of the connections between bureaucracy, sociality, and spaces.

In doing so, it draws attention to the overlooked spaces and struggles that occur in conditions of protracted displacement. In this borderland setting of informalised and volatile housing landscapes, the looming threat of eviction was commonplace. As abandonment emerges from frameworks of state and international neglect, South Sudanese people in Arua experience multiple forms of displacement. Processes of dehoming occur as humanitarian actors systematically disengage from their mandated protection responsibilities. In this way, abandonment is actively produced in one of the most visible refugee situations in the world, and care is displaced into the market. As Cabot and Ramsay argue regarding time and citizenship, diverse populations experience dispossession, dislocation, and displacement 'alongside the machinations of contemporary capitalism that reinforce partitions' (2021, p. 295). The experience of dislocation must be deexceptionalised, even in conditions of cross-border displacement. Whilst capitalist processes of extraction and profit-making seemingly erase the moral dimensions of housing, this chapter argues for a closer theorisation of the encounter between profit, compromise, and compassion. It provides insight into how in situ urbanisation

plays out against informal property mandates at the interface of specific identity regimes, moral boundary-making, profitability, and life in refuge.

Chapter 8: Humanitarian withdrawal

Focusing on the reconfiguration of monthly material support for refugees through Phase III of the prioritisation exercise, this chapter shows how, the (mis)management of humanitarian withdrawal enacts further harm on refugee populations. It argues that affective management, threats of material retribution and physical violence are key tools in the suppression and erasure of discontent.

Introduction

Humanitarian funding in refugee-hosting contexts is increasingly defined by chronic and widening shortfalls (Development Initiatives, 2023). For international institutions such as UNHCR and WFP, unable to meet assessed needs, such budget deficits demand dramatic overhauls of their operational activities. Prioritisation strategies have emerged as a key response to determine how scarce resources are allocated, recognising that this will leave many needs deferred or unmet altogether. They are billed as 'needs-based' measures which aim to direct limited humanitarian resources towards those who international institutions identify as most 'in need' (Aymerich *et al.*, 2023; UNHCR and WFP, 2023a). Inextricably linked to funding shortfalls, the severity of a given prioritisation exercise is directly linked to the uneven funding of displacement contexts across the globe (see also NRC, 2024).

Reflecting this global backdrop, Uganda's refugee response has been undergoing a period of deep and sustained financial contraction. Despite persistent evidence of the severity of household circumstances and steady increases in refugee populations, donors have steadily withdrawn their support for humanitarian protection infrastructures in Uganda (UNHCR, 2023f). As a result, agencies have been forced to scale back on core services including protection programming, shelter, water, sanitation, education and health facilities. This chapter focuses on the changes to monthly food and cash transfers, or basic needs assistance, carried out under the early stages of the Phase III prioritisation exercise in Uganda. The prioritisation exercise, which began in 2021, responds to persistent and large-scale funding shortfalls by targeting this basic need assistance, one of the highest ongoing costs for humanitarian infrastructure.

Against this backdrop, the chapter examines how the prioritisation exercise was designed, implemented, and justified. It analyses how austerity conditions shaped the categorisation of

'vulnerable' households and the phasing out of general assistance. Though driven by shortfalls in funding, this chapter shows that funding shortfalls become intertwined with self-reliance discourses, legitimising reductions in assistance even where refugees' ability to secure sustainable incomes remains limited (UNHCR, 2023i, p. 2; UNICEF *et al.*, 2023, p. v). As well as acknowledging the widespread and devastating impact of these cuts (see also Neiman and Titeca, 2023; Brown and Torre, 2024), this chapter examines the ways that humanitarian withdrawal is retroactively justified, and order is maintained through affective regulation, strategic denial of socio-economic conditions, and the lingering threat of brute force.

The first section introduces the wider backdrop to the prioritisation of food assistance for refugees in Uganda in relation to substantial shortfalls in humanitarian funding. The second details the nationwide enactment of prioritisation, which restructured General Food and cash Assistance (GFA) in Uganda. It highlights the contradictions of dependence, whereby the notion of 'self-reliance' undermines the very relational ties that it hinges on. The third section reflects on the ways that policies and developmental agendas are 'made and sustained socially' (Mosse, 2004, p. 646). Following Mosse, it observes the ways that despite 'fragmentation and dissent, actors in development', or in this case, humanitarian practitioners, 'are constantly engaged in creating order and unity through political acts of composition' (2004, p. 648). Accordingly, I examine the scattered practices that humanitarian workers drew on to maintain official discourses and limit spaces for accountability and dissent. I argue that affective management and the lingering threat of physical violence are key tools in the imposition of the dominant interpretation of events and the invisibilisation and erasure of discontent.

Prioritisation

UNHCR and WFP frame prioritisation and targeting exercises as evidence-based tools to 'inform protective, people-centred, needs-based solutions' for displaced people (UNHCR and WFP, 2021a). The targeting of basic needs assistance aims to ensure that 'the right individuals receive the most appropriate support to address their needs and reinforce their capacities'

(UNHCR and WFP, 2021b, p. 8).[120] While targeting seeks to identify populations for assistance in alignment with programmatic objectives, prioritisation is determined by resource availability (UNHCR and WFP, 2021b, p. 11). At face value, the prioritisation of limited resources to populations most in need sounds like a logical solution. However, given that a 1% drop in food assistance pushes 400,000 people from a situation of acute food insecurity (IPC3) to emergency levels of hunger (IPC4) (WFP, 2023a, p. 2),[121] the conduct and severity of prioritisation is extremely fraught. Premature cuts to food assistance prompt deteriorations in nutritional outcomes and increased reliance on crisis coping strategies, including child labour, transactional sex, and high rates of suicidal ideation.

Monthly assistance is a core pillar of external support for displaced populations, serving as a bulwark against malnutrition and rights violations. Staff at The Famine Early Warnings Systems Network noted that even under 100% rations, many refugee households in Uganda still faced crisis conditions (I-142). Prior to the implementation of ration cuts, 91% of households were economically vulnerable (UNHCR *et al.,* 2020). In 2018, just 6% of refugee households were not relying on coping strategies to deal with a lack of food. Coping strategies included reducing their consumption, eating just one meal a day, spending savings, selling assets, regularly borrowing money or food, begging, selling essential items or food assistance, and consuming seed stock intended for the next planting season (REACH, 2018, p. 90). Often, refugee households live 'from one humanitarian food distribution to the next' (Stites and Humphrey, 2020, p. 25).

In the early months of this thesis, ongoing basic needs assistance was managed by WFP, with the support of implementing partners. This involved distributing GFA to all thirteen refugee settlements in Uganda through two mechanisms: in-kind food distribution and cash-based transfers (CBT). As noted in Chapter 4, GFA to refugees in Uganda has been determined in

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[120] The basic needs approach is a holistic framework to household expenditure which emphasizes catering to all essential needs including access to non-food items and services. The Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) is an operational tool that quantifies the costs of meeting these needs.

[121] The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system indicates that IPC3 corresponds with food consumption gaps, 10-14.9% of children experiencing acute malnutrition and coping strategies including eating only one meal a day and selling assets to increase access to food. IPC4 corresponds with large food consumption gaps, 15-29.9% of children experiencing acute malnutrition, as well as elevated mortality and morbidity levels (IPC Global Partners, 2021, p. 37).

relation to a Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB), a tool which calculates the average costs of basic needs at a household level when accessed through the local market (WFP, 2019). The MEB is an operational guide which standardises household needs – importantly, it does not account for specific individual needs (Peroni, 2019). It offers the 'minimum culturally adjusted group of items required to support a five-person refugee household in Uganda for one month' (WFP and REACH, 2021, p. 2) and is based on a limited range of food commodities (and their estimated market cost equivalent in cash for those receiving CBT) – including maize grain/flour, beans, millet flour, vegetable oil, and salt.

Based on medium-term anticipation of further restrictions to funding, and under the forceful insistence of donors, UNHCR Uganda-WFP Uganda introduced prioritisation as a multi-year exercise, which they would roll out across several phases (outlined in Figure 22). Senior staff of the UNHCR-WFP Joint Programming Hub for Targeting and Assistance, explained that donors had increasingly expressed frustration over the UNHCR and WFP's delays in developing a prioritisation programme, which they had agreed to as many as five years before the cutbacks (I-178). The resulting exercise followed earlier cuts to GFA that reduced universal rations for refugees in Uganda to 70% of a minimum survival basket in April 2020 (roughly equivalent to USD 6.90 per month) and in February 2021 to 60% (USD 5.90 per month).
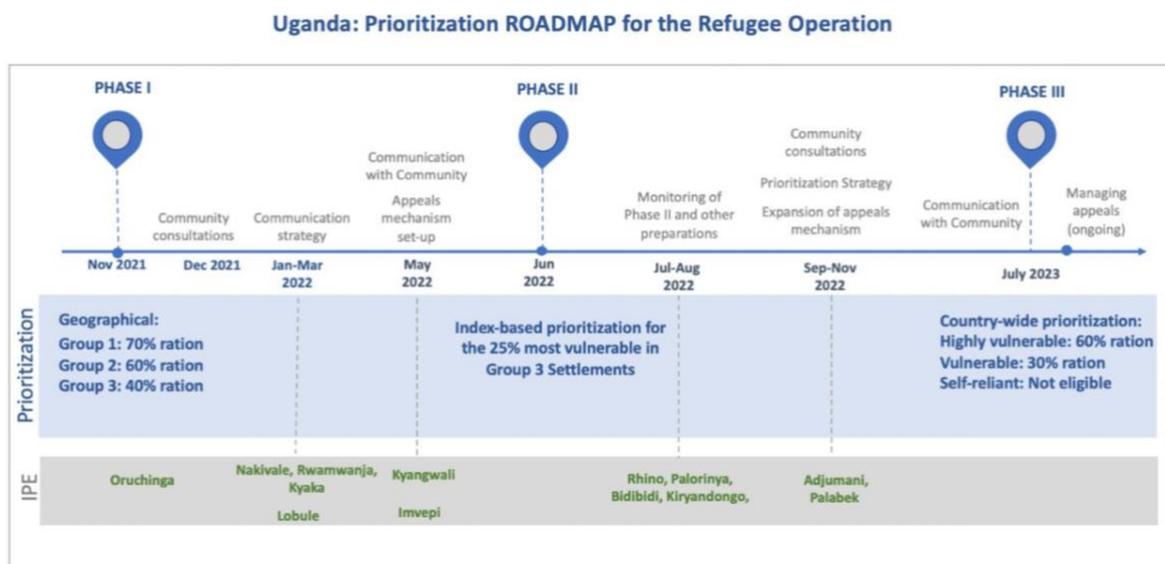
Figure 22 – Prioritization roadmap for the refugee operation. Source: UNHCR and WFP, 2023b, p. 4.

Phase I restructured rations at the settlement level. This phase was, in part, a temporary, compromise measure. The COVID-19 lockdown forced a delay in the collection of data nationwide (ATWG, 2021). Accordingly, UNHCR and WFP relied on regional geographical information, agricultural potential, economic opportunities, and local market prices to produce three groups of settlements (UNHCR and WFP, 2023b, p. 4). They allocated households in Group 1 settlements (West Nile) a 70% ration, households in Group 2 settlements remained at 60%, and households in Group 3 settlements were allocated 40% rations, based on Southwest having better prospects for self-reliance. As an overall result, refugees in Uganda received the lowest rations in the East African region (WFP, 2023b, p. 14).

Phase II restructuring, implemented in 2022, marked the first efforts to roll out a household-level needs-based allocation of GFA resources. Refugee populations in southwestern Uganda tended to fare better in measures of well-being relative to refugee populations in northern and northwestern Uganda.[122] For instance, the Vulnerability and Essential Needs Assessment, based on data collected in 2019, found that 96% of households in West Nile are highly economically vulnerable as compared to 84% in the Southwest (UNHCR *et al.,* 2020, p. 4). Accordingly, in 2022, UNHCR and WFP used index-based ranking 'to identify the most vulnerable refugees in the settlements where food rations were lowest', i.e. those in southwestern Uganda, 'as an interim measure before the national rollout of household level prioritisation' (UNHCR and WFP, 2023b, p. 3).

These changes coincided with two challenges to refugee well-being. Firstly, over this time, Southwest Uganda received a high number of refugees, stretching access to social services. Secondly, the southwest also experienced the effects of inflation more dramatically, owing to a higher proportion of cash recipients than in West Nile. Nonetheless, it is striking that during Phase II, households in the South-West faced comparable conditions to those in West Nile. In 2022, several metrics, including malnutrition rates, indicated worse outcomes for refugees in the

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[122] Notwithstanding that these sub-regional overviews can obscure intense variability in individual experiences. Legal anthropologist Sophie Nakueira extensively documents the lived experiences of people whom the humanitarian protection system formally recognises as vulnerable and the limits of the whole-of-society approach to protection (2022).

Southwest than those in West Nile. In 2022, only 29.9% of households in West Nile adopted negative irreversible crisis and emergency strategies, compared to 46.7% in the southwest (Government of Uganda and UNHCR, 2024; UNHCR and WFP, 2023b). Between 2020 and 2022, households in Southwestern Uganda reduced their expenditure on food from 67.4% to 63.4% and increasingly resorted to extreme coping strategies, including begging (WFP, 2022, p. 18). Thus, the south-west seemed to suffer from the implementation of the prioritisation in critical ways.

Despite growing evidence about the dangers of these changes for major indicators of refugee welfare, faced with ongoing pressure from international donors, UNHCR Uganda and WFP Uganda proceeded to roll out this approach nationwide.

Phase III

Having outlined the high-level context for the prioritisation exercise, this section examines the rollout of 'phase three' from four angles. Firstly, it considers the communication of changes to GFA prior to the implementation of the changes in July 2023. Secondly, it raises critical questions about the data on which the weighted index was based. Thirdly, it addresses the now-suspended appeals process as a further example of mismanaged expectations and flawed planning. Finally, it considers the immediate effects of the changes at the household and inter-household level.

Communicating changes to GFA

International agencies introduced Phase III as a technical 'needs-based' measure to allocate limited donor funds. At a press briefing in Kampala in January 2023, Marcus Prior, WFP's Deputy Country Director in Uganda explained the logic of Phase III of the prioritisation exercise in Uganda: 'The basic tenet of this phase is to ensure that the most vulnerable refugees and new arrivals receive the highest recommended rations, while weaning the least vulnerable and self-reliant households off the monthly general food assistance' (Prior, 2023). In the same month, a letter, co-signed by WFP, OPM and UNHCR, delivered key messages about the next phase of the prioritisation to refugee stakeholders (see Appendix B – Phase III). The letter, dated 18th January, concerned the 'Prioritisation of General Food and Cash Assistance (GFA) to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Uganda'. I was notified of the letter by a former Cash and Food Assistant

(CFA) who had received the message via the General Food/Cash Assistance WhatsApp group for Rhino settlement created by YSAT (Youth Social Advocacy Team), an organisation which operated in several zones across the settlement.

The letter indicated that over the months that followed, refugee households would be allocated to one of three vulnerability categories. These categories would determine the level of ongoing monthly assistance each household would receive. The vulnerability rankings were based on the Individual Profiling Exercise (IPE) that collected household data on all refugees in Uganda between October 2021 and December 2022. During the profiling exercise, households answered questions concerning thirteen key variables, alongside basic identity verification questions. Among these were socio-demographic and protection-relevant variables such as serious medical conditions, household dependency ratio, and child protection issues. From the resultant dataset, UNHCR and WFP established a weighted index to assess relative levels of 'vulnerability' among refugee households. WFP staff emphasised the need to remember that they assessed these needs on a relative, not absolute, basis of poverty, considered within the Uganda-based refugee population (I-137).

As explained in the letter, households determined as 'most vulnerable' would receive 'the highest ration possible'. Moderately vulnerable households were to 'receive a reduced ration, with the vision that they are transitioned to livelihood and self-reliance programmes led by different development actors'. Least vulnerable households would 'be transitioned out of relief assistance', on the basis of their 'self-reliance'. The letter defined refugee self-reliance as being able to 'cover their food needs without receiving WFP's food/cash assistance'. In effect, the vulnerability index reduced determinations of self-reliance to survivability, whereby the ability to independently avoid starvation is the benchmark for economic independence. This reflects broader patterns whereby international institutions defer to a minimalist definition of self-reliance when faced with aid shortfalls. Looking at the 'myth of self-reliance' in Buduburam, a Liberian refugee camp, Omata wrote 'UNHCR often perceives refugees as 'self-reliant' when they are managing their lives' without the assistance of international aid agencies (2017, p. 5).[123] This is a vastly different

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[123] In the Liberian case, Omata also demonstrated that the supposed economic vibrancy of Buduburam masked drastic levels of inequality and dependence on international remittances. The likely presence of these inequalities and

definition of self-reliance from one which describes refugees as 'meeting their basic needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity' (UNHCR, 2005, p. 1).

The letter outlined a clear hierarchy of the types of support households were entitled to, but failed to specify the criteria linking households to each category. It also omitted any indication of the proportion of households assigned to each tier. Moreover, it did not acknowledge the broader impact of service reductions on the refugee response infrastructure, which has compelled a growing number of households to divert GFA towards other essential needs such as education, healthcare, and debt repayment. This was a pivotal moment for the contemporary refugee response infrastructure, since the onset of South Sudan's civil war, all refugees registered in Uganda's settlements had been entitled to monthly rations.

The final allocations applied in July 2023 were as follows. The index defined Category 1 households (13.4% of refugee households) as the most vulnerable. Going forward, they would receive a 60% ration (28,000 UGX per person per month in cash-based transfers). Those in Category 2 - 82.2% of refugee households, would receive 30% (13,000 UGX per month). As this indicates, most of the refugee population would receive a reduced ration equivalent to USD 3.7 per person per month. For Category 2 households, the exercise marked a step along their self-reliance journey, which, in conjunction with livelihood programming, would eventually enable their transition to Category 3 status. Those in Category 3, the 4.4% of households the governing bodies perceived as least vulnerable, were declared sufficiently self-reliant such that they were no longer in need of ongoing monthly assistance. Although Category 3 households would retain their legal status as refugees, they would no longer receive monthly support in any form.

The head of WFP for the northern and northwestern region indicated that in the months preceding Phase III implementation, the actors implemented a robust communications strategy involving local leaders in the refugee welfare committee, mobile loudspeaker announcements, help desks, and texts to nominated household mobile phones (I-139). However, there was widespread confusion among both refugees, implementing partners and sub-regional office staff

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divergent coping mechanisms is important to bear in mind when considering questions of how people survive despite humanitarian abandonment.

of UNHCR and WFP over the process and implications of the categorisation process. Awut, a resident of Tika, explained that she did not understand the process: 'Nobody ever explained it to me. I asked some refugee leaders, and they never explained it to me, and it seemed like they are also like me, lacking the same information I was looking for' (I-158). Refugees report widespread miscommunications and difficulties accessing information in the settlements - 72% of refugees reported difficulties in accessing information (Government of Uganda and UNHCR, 2022, p. 23) – as such, despite WFP's claims of implementing a robust information communication structure, it is reasonable to assume that the reported difficulties in this context were likely to be valid and widespread.[124]

Several households residing within the settlement structure explained that they were only notified of their allocated category and the corresponding implications for the level of support they would receive in June 2023, one month before the implementation of the new categorisations. Others explained that they only found out about the reduction of the rations when the food had already been reduced. Focus group participants explained, 'This message was very abrupt. If they were going to reduce the ratio of the food relief…..they should have come openly telling us that during this period of time we shall be reducing the ratio and level of the food relief … for us here, we were not told about the reduction of the food relief ratio but only people came to realize that the ratio of the food relief has been reduced' (F-5).

Indexing vulnerability

One of the major challenges facing the implementation of prioritisation was the quality of the data underpinning the exercise (Neiman and Titeca, 2022). The data was collected during individual profiling exercises conducted by UNHCR and government workers between October 2021 and December 2022 (UNHCR and WFP, 2023c). This prolonged time period produces data comparability problems and further risks the data being outdated. Moreover, responses may have been influenced by seasonal variations in household income and livelihoods, further impacting the reliability of the data used for prioritisation. As well as problems with the timeframe of the data collection, interactions between refugee households and enumerators took

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[124] UNHCR and WFP later corroborated this in their learning review on the prioritisation exercise (2025, p. 14).

place under strained circumstances. The exercise required that every member of a given household queued outside the verification centre in their zone, sometimes for hours, until it was their turn to register their details in the system. As I observed in Ofua in September 2022, refugee households would then crowd into the tent facility, where enumerators asked highly personal questions about their household circumstances. To overcome language barriers, paid volunteers from within the same community served as translators. This raises important concerns about confidentiality for household members who may not have felt comfortable sharing the full details of their circumstances. The data was collected in short interactions between enumerators and heads of households in congested spaces - as a result, mistakes were highly likely. Collecting data on a household basis, requiring all household members to be present, also raises concerns for the accurate elicitation of key protection indicators – many of which are explicitly concerned with intra-household power dynamics such as domestic violence. The shortcomings in the data collection process have very real material consequences for households facing undue exclusion from support.

With sufficient funding, the data set would undergo regular updates. Household circumstances are highly changeable, with high dependency ratios, spikes in inflation, limited income-generating opportunities, and seasonal variations in resource availability. However, with limited resources, practical implementation falls short. There is minimal staff presence in settlements, even on distribution days and as a result, refugees struggle to update their records. Consequently, even when collected accurately, the data collected in individual profiling exercises only offers a limited snapshot at a specific moment in time. Additional concerns can be raised about the stability of categories, even assuming the data collected was accurate at the time. Particularly for those designated in category three, many individuals able to find work within the settlement do so through humanitarian and developmental programming interventions. Households that may have been perceived as more financially stable, may have appeared so because they were able to access relatively well-paid employment opportunities through humanitarian operations. As those programmes closed and/or scaled down, in line with widespread funding shortfalls, the stability these households may have enjoyed rapidly deteriorated, raising further concerns about relying on a static dataset to determine levels of ongoing food and cash assistance.

Beyond the national headquarters of UNHCR and WFP, sub-regional UN staff and refugees alike expressed their frustration regarding the lack of transparency around the decision-making for the categorisations. The weighting of the thirteen indexed variables remains a closely guarded secret. Staff from WFP Uganda justified their reticence to share the allocations' structure on the basis that people without adequate statistical know-how would be unable to fully grasp the system. Yet, sub-regional staff of UNHCR and staff from leading in-country research organisations stressed that they, too, had been unable to access any additional information (I-155, 152, 142). Widespread vulnerability among refugee households and high pressure to meet donor funding limits likely contributed to relatively arbitrary decision-making regarding which categories of vulnerability would be weighted more highly in the index. This is further illustrated by the fact that initial plans for the prioritisation indicated that Category 1 should include 25% of all refugee households; yet, owing to funding shortfalls, only 13.4% of households made the cut.

In private interviews, senior staff of international institutions who were not directly involved in the implementation of Phase III indicated their suspicions that the lack of transparency concerning the allocations strategy may reflect a lack of understanding of the process within these institutions and that decisions may not be adequately justifiable owing to the rushed implementation of the prioritisation (I-178, 180). Yet, despite recognition of widespread vulnerability among refugee households and the primacy of funding shortfalls in decision-making, UNHCR and WFP documentation still cite degrading presumptions that refugees will lie to fraudulently amplify their vulnerability as a reason not to disclose these criteria to refugees (2023c). Even if that were the case, it is important to note that the risks of an inclusion error in this context are minimal, given that most households are considered highly vulnerable and the risks of exclusion are high.[125] Such justifications are reflective of wider patterns whereby the humanitarian apparatus 'demands transparency from refugees but [makes decisions] within black boxes of bureaucratic opacity' (Thomson, 2012, p. 187).

These shortcomings raise critical concerns for the viability and value of prioritisation exercises in resource-strained, humanitarian settings. In their examination of social safety net targeting

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[125] Similar points are made by Bakewell *et al.* (2025) in the preliminary findings from their study of differentiated assistance in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya.

evidence from nine programs in the Sahel, Schnitzer and Stoeffler (2021) raise relevant concerns about the value of narrowly defined approaches to poverty targeting in low-income settings. They observe that community-based targeting and proxy-based targeting 'contribute little to poverty or food insecurity reduction efforts in poor and homogeneous settings'. As they state, 'after geographical targeting is applied, the other targeting method employed is not likely to make a major difference in reducing poverty or food insecurity in low-income settings' (*ibid.*, p. 4). This observation holds particular relevance for the Ugandan context, where the costs associated with implementing the Individual Profiling Exercise —including the development of an index-weighted measure—may have been better used to contribute to limited programme budgets. Moreover, the exercise contributed to a breakdown in institutional trust following the perceived failures of the prioritisation process. As Schnitzer and Stoeffler underscore, 'generating targeting methods that bring satisfaction and legitimacy to local communities can, arguably, be as or more important as generating methods that reach the poorest of the poor' (*ibid.*, p. 8). This points to the critical importance of legitimacy and community acceptance in shaping the effectiveness and sustainability of targeting efforts.

Appeals

The management of the now-suspended appeals process is a particularly revealing example of the ways that mismanagement and miscommunication unfolded around the prioritisation exercise with detrimental effects on trust between refugees and humanitarian staff. One of the commitments made by the jointly signed letter announcing prioritisation was the appeals process. The appeals process was intended to provide an opportunity for households to challenge their allocated categorisation. As it stated, if a household believed they had been 'erroneously categorized', there was to be 'a formal and transparent appeals mechanism to be jointly managed by WFP, UNHCR and OPM'. The letter indicated that the signatories would clarify the details of the appeals process 'before implementation', yet as late as June 2023, there was clear apprehension about communicating the details of the appeals mechanism within WFP. Two WFP staff, interviewed in late June 2023, conveyed their uncertainty: 'There is a conversation about whether we should call it an appeals mechanism because of the legal constraints around that, because of the funding resources. So, we continue to advocate to different donors to see what comes up and what we are able to do' (I-137).

The lack of transparency regarding the criteria defining each category also made concerns about miscategorisations very difficult to substantiate. Twenty-two thousand households based their claims on self-identified best guesses of household vulnerability levels. Staff of humanitarian agencies told those who believed they had been miscategorised to exercise 'patience' and wait to receive the feedback. Settlement-based staff used recourse to 'patience' to defer or completely evade accountability and deny the reality of hunger and urgency facing refugees in the present. People who had been mistakenly categorised as 'self-reliant' and therefore were no longer entitled to any material support included an older member of the RWC in Tika who, owing to leprosy, had lost his fingers and was unable to work. It would take four months before anyone would receive feedback on their complaint – even then, 1200 were recategorised (Neiman and Titeca, 2023), with many rejected and thousands of applications remained unresolved (WFP, 2023b, p. 33). Funding constraints and associated planning problems also limited emergency relief for those who might have otherwise been in category one.

For those who were eventually recategorised into a group of higher vulnerability, it seemed reasonable to query whether there would be corrective assistance distributed on the basis that they had been affected by four months of no GFA. When I asked about the possibility of retroactive compensation, a senior sub-regional WFP staff member laughed: 'There is no such thing as retroactive food – you can't expand the stomach for the meals they have missed.' When I noted that on the basis that households were not receiving a full ration but only a portion of a minimum expenditure basket, it is arguably not even necessary to expand the stomach, the response remained, 'There is no such thing as retroactive food' (I-139). In early 2024, informal conversations with technocrats revealed that no further adjustments would be made as the various categories had reached their funding capacity and as such, the appeals process was suspended.

Early on in the implementation of the new GFA structure, some staff of international institutions took it upon themselves to reiterate these points to individuals categorised in group 3 on individual social media pages – commenting under a selfie posted by one South Sudanese refugee who had been placed in category three, 'Self-reliant'. The same individual who was known to stay in town, albeit as a guest of another family rather than through their own income, shared that upon entering the FDP in July, they were told by a WFP member, 'What are you

doing here? You are self-reliant.' In this sense, the 'self-reliance' discourse can be considered a productive agent in the rollout of prioritisation, which works against complaints by households allocated under category three and delegitimises their potential claims to vulnerability with stark material consequences. As Avery Gordon put it, 'we are reminded that when ghosts haunt, that haunting is material' (2008, p. 184). Far from acting as a benign, idealistic notion, self-reliance surfaces in everyday life as a silencing force that enables the systematic erasure of their grievances.

Immediate effects

As WFP noted in their 2023 annual report, these 'ration cuts deepened food insecurity' (2023f, p. 13). In 2023, the Uganda Cash Working Group updated their estimates of the Minimum Expenditure Basket. Accounting for eleven components: food, hygiene, water, education, energy and environment, transport, communication, clothing, health, other household items and personal expenditures, and livelihoods, based on a household of five people, the MEB estimates a monthly expenditure equivalent to 682,551 UGX. 58% of this - 396,860 UGX - is the food component. To put these cuts into further context, a five-member household in Category 1 would only receive 140,000 UGX per month. Those UNHCR and WFP identify as the most vulnerable households receive support equivalent to only 20.5% of the minimum expenditure basket.

Household budgets were already under severe stress. Within the confines of the settlement, to cope with the changes and the associated uncertainty, people adopted different strategies. Some, anticipating further reductions in support, left the settlement. Others remained, waiting to see how things would play out. As one focus group participant noted, 'concerning the issue of food relief, there are some children who have been left at home and their mothers could have gone up to Lukung, Padwat or even to Sudan to look for food through casual labouring (leja-leja)' (F-5). This tends to involve poorly remunerated, seasonal, labour-intensive work. For example, in Palabek, household members report walking for several hours to secure this temporary, demeaning work on the farms of Ugandan citizens (see Torre, 2023, pp. 212-214; Gidron,

2024).[126] Far from displaying a lack of effort or action, these examples serve as important reminders that the tools for success were unavailable from the outset. In other words, if there was fertile land available in the nearby area, it is reasonable to assume that refugees would pursue agriculture for themselves rather than poorly remunerated work for other households. Though communications to stakeholders positioned livelihood opportunities as a support to mitigate the implications of food reduction, conversations with UNHCR Livelihoods Officers confirmed that actual opportunities were extremely limited and have, in some cases, taken years to materialise (O-9, I-141).

In the absence of forthcoming institutional support, households resort increasingly to negative coping mechanisms, including skipping meals, begging and transactional sex. A South Sudanese woman in Tika explained, 'People are looking for other means of survival. People who have the capacity are doing business, those are people who have money. Some people are begging for food while other borrows from neighbours. That is how people are surviving. Some people sleep hungry, especially starting from the middle of the month until they receive food. People survive on food that they beg for' (I-158). Despite relative reductions in the cost of essential food items at the time, individuals across all three categories reported experiencing greater economic insecurity.[127]

It is worth stressing that these policies are deployed in a context where 57% of the population is children (UNHCR, 2023h), and the majority of households are headed up by a single adult (Government of Uganda and UNHCR, 2022, p. 10). This has several consequences for the range of options available to households seeking to generate additional income. One woman narrated that, having been in Uganda since 2019, the prioritisation forced her to travel to Juba in search of work. As a consequence, her 14-year-old daughter, now de facto head of the household, found herself responsible for several young children. The woman continued, 'It is still hard for

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[126] Casual labour in the area surrounding refugee settlements is a phenomenon which extends beyond Uganda. Boeyink (2020), shows that even in Tanzania, where refugee movement is forbidden by the government, refugees provide a cheap source of labour in the local area.

[127] Quantitative evidence regarding the effects of large-scale aid cuts is sparse. However, recently published work analysing high-frequency panel data across 622 households in Kakuma also points to evidence that aid cuts can have widespread impacts including reductions in household borrowing and tighter lending conditions among shopkeepers (Sterck and Bruni, 2025).

my daughter since she is underage. Sometimes they receive food [instead of cash] since no one is above eighteen. They are not safe' (I-158). Bureaucrats are quick to condemn people who leave their children alone without a responsible adult, but as this woman narrated, the same staff, with little else to offer, 'usually give the idea that parents should go away, and they should leave their children alone in the house' (I-158).

Unsurprisingly, reductions to GFA have heavily impacted expenditure on non-food items. To offer just one example, remembering that schools closed for 22 months during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of these cutbacks, many children face further setbacks to their education. As detailed in Chapter 4, additional costs for education include school meals, examinations, uniforms, and PTA contributions. Households would often use the GFA ration value to cover these expenses. With limited alternatives, children were increasingly drawn into household labour as one of a range of coping strategies and/or because they were simply too hungry to attend. The economic shockwaves of these changes have also affected the strength of local markets – those who may have been earning sufficient income prior to the prioritisation find there is no longer a market for their products, and find their resources depleted.[128] One interviewee from a single-member household said, 'you can count the number of maize grains given' (I-174). Another focus group discussant in Palabek narrated, 'even if you are strong, you will become weak… For those who have the energy to farm, they would have been informed three to four months before because within such a period you can plant crops and produce yield, some people can even return to South Sudan to look for food' (F-5).

Even in 2017, when receiving full rations, 89% of severely food-insecure households indicated 'that they recently contracted new debt' (OPM *et al.*, 2020, p. 84). These highly irregular and localised patterns of debt are often beneath the purview of institutions, but nonetheless form vital forms of survival infrastructure as micro-relations of indebtedness which permeate both refugee and non-refugee spaces. While concerns about refugee 'dependency' emphasise mainly the ongoing 'care and maintenance' type support provided by international institutions, relief aid is just one strand of a 'complex web of interdependencies that make up livelihoods under stress

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[128] Harrell-Bond (1986, pp. 354-355) observed similar effects in Sudan in the 1980s noting that the withdrawal of food aid was ultimately putting people out of business.

in crises' (Harvey and Lind, 2005, p. 6). These complex webs comprise entanglements of debt and mutual, albeit uneven, practices of exchange that enable survival in these spaces. However, there is an important question about the effects of prioritisation and differentiated assistance on the survival structures that people rely on to get by.

For inter-household borrowing, in Rhino and Palabek, participants reported that the withdrawal of monthly support further strained relations between friends and neighbours. Members of households categorised in Group 3 were reportedly unable to borrow - in the absence of a guaranteed monthly income, they were seen as unreliable debtors. These dynamics reiterate the point made by Crawley and Skleparis, categories are not simply tools of bureaucratic convenience, they 'have consequences' – they are materially and socially meaningful (2018, p. 59). One focus group participant narrated, 'The issue of dividing people in Group 3, Group 2 and Group 1 has brought a lot of division amongst the people. It has also led to people committing suicide. There are some mothers whose names have appeared in Group 3, ropes have just been cut from their necks … you find that from the other side, the computer has taken her name to Group 3 and there will be no person to help her' (F-5). In RCS, while neighbourly support was considered an important aspect of moral personhood among many interlocutors, many recognised the enormous financial challenges facing their neighbours, which inevitably limited the extent of generosity - there simply is not enough to go around.

In RCS and in Palabek, faced with insufficient institutional support and limited income-generating opportunities, households sought alternative ways to make ends meet, often borrowing through informal mechanisms. Social networks have long been an important source of support in displacement (Gladden, 2013; Hutchinson and Dorsett, 2012; Omata, 2013; Ager *et al.,* 2015).[129] With trends towards localisation, social networks are valorised by international institutions and their representatives as unproblematic signs of community empowerment and innovation. These tendencies reflect the performative elements of the self-reliance discourse, which seeks to foist responsibility away from governments and international institutions (in their various forms – donors, aid agencies, etc), towards individuals and their networks. Social

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[129] Much as for those who have not been spatially displaced (Monteith, 2016; Scherz, 2014; Storer, 2024).

networks are a convenient workaround for an absence of state or institutional support.[130] Indeed, UNHCR considers the overall stability of communities as an indicator of economic self-reliance (2005). However, these infrastructures are no substitute for reliable, standardised support (Meagher, 2010; Omata, 2017). Omata, for example, sketches the economic inequality among refugee households in a supposed self-reliant refugee camp in Ghana. He finds that among Liberian refugees residing in Buduburam, international remittances were the key to '[masking] the absence of enabling conditions for Liberian refugees to pursue economic independence by creating the veneer of a vibrant economy' (2017, p. 143). Chiming with rich regional discussions of mutuality, we must be cautious not to reify notions of community resilience and interdependence. As anthropologist Clara Han (2012, p. 28) argues in relation to neoliberal Chile, the overassertion of relations of care and love may obfuscate the boundaries, uncertainty and inequalities that pervade relationships, sometimes with devastating consequences. Below displacement policies, undergirding the failures of humanitarianism, is an uneven, volatile, and at times exclusionary micropolitics of debt.

Interpreting and justifying cuts

As outlined above, the prioritisation exercise was primarily motivated by large-scale shortfalls in humanitarian funding. However, over the period of the cuts and in the fraught navigation of the prioritisation exercise, INGO, UN and government staff offered myriad explanations to explain, justify, and defend the scale, consequences, and logic of the cuts.

Global humanitarian funding

Humanitarian staff widely cited the limited resources directed toward Uganda's refugee infrastructure as a key justification for the cuts. Monthly assistance is one of the highest ongoing financial costs for the humanitarian sector; as such, it becomes a key source of concern for donors looking to scale back their outgoings. Conversations with in-country donor staff suggested that this was even more evident in Uganda, where the generous posture of the

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[130] In Uganda's case government led social security infrastructures are not considered a viable option. From UNHCR staff perspectives, the Ugandan government has failed to develop their national social welfare infrastructures and lag behind the refugee social protection infrastructure (I-180).

government enabled donors to justify their withdrawal. The head of WFP Partnerships in Uganda expressed his frustration with Uganda's exceptionalism: 'Uganda's policy has been hailed as a model framework, without recognising the ecological and economic constraints facing those based in the settlements who try to farm 30x30 plots' (I-169). He explained, donors perceive the land allocations as a breakthrough in refugee concessions, which enables an adequate level of self-reliance. Donors sidestep the reality that subsistence farming is heavily constrained by spatial limitations, rainfall, and soil fertility in favour of a convenient, cost-saving narrative.

At the settlement level, some staff cited the Russia-Ukraine conflict to explain that other emergencies were eating into the overall humanitarian budget so there was less money to go around. When confronted by complaints, those interfacing directly with refugees asserted that the donors were the ones making decisions about funding, implying that staff in the settlements, or even at the national HQ level, had minimal capacity for action on the part of staff on the ground. This not only elicits a sense of resignation from the complainants but also demands that refugees offer their 'understanding' for the position of the settlement-level staff who transform themselves into mere messengers. Structural inequalities remain unaddressed and intact. The role that aid and government staff themselves play in diverting and misusing funds, including the registration of over 300,000 ghost refugees, prior to the cuts is entirely overlooked (Anonymous, 2022). These deflections leave structural inequalities unaddressed and intact, whilst also obfuscating the lines of accountability for refugees' current predicaments.

Strikingly, some refugees in Palabek cited a rumour that the deaths of key donors prompted the cutbacks. As one focus group participant put it, 'We started encountering problems during the period of corona. Indeed, during the period of corona life was not easy at all concerning food relief. There were complaints from the authorities that the donors who are giving us the food relief, most of them have died, hence this was the beginning of our problem. Nowadays, there is no corona, but the condition has become more difficult than in the past' (F-5). Although this is a more unusual framing of the issue, it is a striking image whereby the supposed death of donors is associated with the evisceration of the protection infrastructure.

Performance of success

There is a widely identified tendency for funding to drop off in conditions of protected displacement (Crisp, 2003; Jacobsen, 2005, p. 2; Jamal, 2000, p. 3). While scripts of protracted displacement suppose that displaced populations will have had sufficient time to establish themselves and so experience an elevated level of financial stability, aid agencies and donors consistently phase out assistance despite evidence of perpetual impoverishment. Further evidence of this is provided in WFP data, which observed that between 2022 and 2023, there were notable decreases in livelihood-related coping strategies from 38 per cent of households to 15 per cent (WFP, 2023b, p. 13). As noted in the overall framing of prioritisation activities, prioritisation is a 'resource-driven' process which recognises 'that not all needs can be met with the available resources' (UNHCR and WFP, 2021b, p. 11).[131] In other words, despite recognised evidence of ongoing needs, there is not enough money to sustain the support.[132]

Given the context of major funding shortfalls, WFP can be understood to be reinventing itself to try to access livelihoods funding, rather than immediate relief assistance. This can be observed in the May 2024 self-reliance model briefing. The briefing declared a 'market-oriented pathway-based approach' which planned to target 100,000 participants for enrolment between 2024 and 2026. Staff developing the latest iteration of livelihood programmes argued that they could overcome the status quo by focusing on 'resilience and livelihood-strengthening activities [to] support a broader transition to self-reliance in refugee settlements' (Prior, 2023). This helps to explain why on page one of the initial letter to refugee leaders, while acknowledging the 'declining funding situation', the letter explained that 'at the heart of this shift is the need to focus on resilience and livelihood-strengthening activities that support a broader transition to self-reliance in refugee settlements'. The letter further indicated that the first step for the prioritisation was 'to identify those least vulnerable households who have *achieved self-reliance'* (emphasis my own). Consistent with this aim, as Kampala-based WFP Uganda staff observed, the goal, as far as WFP Uganda was concerned, is to increase the number of refugees in Category

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[131] Appendix B illustrates how international institutions communicated these measures to refugees in Uganda.
[132] Again, this is consistent with established trends. Hovil (2002), considering withdrawals from refugee infrastructures in Moyo, to the northeast of Rhino, in the late 1990s and early 2000s noted that rations were phased out precisely at the point when the land needed to be left to fallow, and so was unavailable for harvesting.

3 through various means. 'For example, through self-identification, there are refugees living in urban areas, able to come forward to say we do not need assistance. So that is why we also anticipate that 4% increasing over the next few months or years' (I-137).

The desire to somewhat arbitrarily inflate self-reliance figures is reminiscent of earlier critiques of Uganda's refugee policy. Kaiser (2000, p. 1466) showed how UNHCR Uganda established a reputation of success in self-sufficiency in Kiryandongo to justify the absorption of refugees into local government structures and thereby justify UNHCR's withdrawal. Before its handover, UNHCR carefully constructed Kiryandongo's reputation as 'the most successful settlement in Africa' based on the supposed self-reliance of its residents. The 'dressing-up' of funding cuts is also consistent with established precedents in Uganda. The Reintegration and Local Settlement Section Mission Report 2004/03 noted that funding from UNHCR decreased immediately following the inception of the Self-Reliance Strategy in 1999. While reflecting strategic operational recalibrations to meet the requirements of changing funding landscapes, these shifts obscure the structural constraints refugees continue to face, ultimately, placing the burden of adaptation on refugees themselves, rather than the political and financial structures that produced scarcity in the first place (Duffield, 2007; Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015; Scott-Smith, 2020).

Dependency mindset

A second, potent justification offered for the withdrawal of aid was the notion that a shock would encourage refugees to behave as more responsible, active economic agents. Within UNHCR Uganda's Kampala office, the causality of failed livelihood programmes was located in what they described as the 'mindset problem'. As Geoffrey, a WFP staff member, narrated, 'this is a relief assistance, not a safety net programme. It has been here for more than a decade, and because of that, households are not inclined or willing to make reciprocal efforts to change their status' (I-137). Though they offered a secondary acknowledgement of the structural constraints facing refugees, national headquarters-based staff members made clear their feelings that certain groups of refugees were just not willing to try or use the resources available. In doing so, they frame refugees as dependent on aid and suggest that 'mindsets' were the limiting factor, with South Sudanese people identified as being unwilling to take initiative with the ample resources given to them, implicitly leading to the failure of earlier livelihoods initiatives. As Harvey and Lind note, concerns about the existence of a dependency mindset 'reveals much about many of

the attitudes and assumptions that underpin the ways in which humanitarian aid is delivered' (2005, p. 6). Aid and welfare programmes under neoliberal imaginaries internalise the root causes of poverty to the recipients of support (Duffield, 2002; Muehlebach, 2012; Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015) and depoliticise responsibility for those populations (Darling, 2016).

For humanitarian agencies, it is convenient to use beneficiary populations as scapegoats to justify withdrawals of support. Legal anthropologist Barbara Harrell-Bond, in *Imposing Aid* (1986)*,* her seminal study of the humanitarian response in southern Sudan, lambasted ineffectual and unaccountable aid agencies for their vertical programming, which undermined people's capacities for self-protection. For example, failing to provide food support for refugees undergoing emergency medical treatment who cannot attend food distribution, thus missing their ration allocation, ultimately undermines their recovery (*ibid.*, p. 216). Sensitive to criticism, aid agencies tended to cast refugees as ungrateful and untrustworthy villains rather than deal with the obvious inadequacies of their programmes (*ibid.*, pp. 302-5). Not only does this deny the extensive efforts people undertake to improve their lives despite immense hardship (*ibid.*; see also, Kibreab, 1993), but it also suggests that some are not worthy of compassion.

To return to the 'refugee journey' presented by Kampala-based WFP staff – from arrival to *self-reliance*, stability, and the ability to live freely in the country' (I-137, emphasis my own) – this journey towards self-reliance smooths over the frictions, tensions and outright contradictions that litter the conditions of refuge in Uganda. For example, descriptions of the 'Ugandan model' regularly suggest that refugees in Uganda are able to access public services on an equal basis with Ugandan citizens. In actuality, as Chapter 3 details, there are several limitations on refugees' de jure rights, as well as their de facto rights. Under Uganda's Refugee Act 2006 and Refugee Regulations 2010, refugees have the right to equal treatment in educational access only when it concerns primary education. Refugees have no long-term route to property ownership or citizenship. These limits are all inscribed in the legislation governing refugee rights in Uganda, let alone the fact that de facto access to rights is highly constrained.

The homogenising discourse of refugees as potentially self-sufficient agents is a misleading response to declining support and material resourcing of protection. Though a 1% drop in food assistance pushes 400,000 people from IPC3 to IPC4 (WFP, 2023a), donors and humanitarian

actors continue to perceive food assistance as a barrier to self-reliance, rather than a fundamental resource integral to the success of all elements of the self-reliance framework. For Category Two households, international institutions suggested that the reduction in food assistance was a necessary prompt to encourage economic independence. This patronising and paternalistic agenda focused on what they identified as an internalised problem instead of the structural limitations hampering economic success. The official transcript of reductions argued that removing Category Three refugees from the GFA roster entirely would fast-track their efforts to meet their own essential needs. Humanitarian staff proffer these accusations with minimal respect for refugees' struggles to improve their economic circumstances.

At the same time, Krause and Schmidt argue that the continued use of 'binary categories of vulnerable versus self-reliant or resilient refugees' (2019, p. 22) entrenches the power aid agencies hold over refugees. By examining the macro-level discourses of UNHCR's global policies, they argue that rather than portraying refugees as 'actors', UNHCR's continued reliance on 'vulnerability' framings produces refugees instead, as 'actors-to-be'. In doing so, UNHCR supports the case for the traditional aid infrastructure – justifying their own existence. This sub-section complements this analysis by arguing that the discursive production of 'actor-to-be' suppresses calls for alternative structures by foisting blame onto displaced populations who can be technocratically managed towards better outcomes.

Moreover, these claims deny the sustained efforts of heterogeneous populations. As discussed previously, casualised labour is one of the ways that refugees supplement their incomes. A focus group discussant in Palabek narrated the challenges he faced even when they were able to successfully yield crops: 'There was a group that brought for refugee pumpkin seedlings, it was this year and when we planted the pumpkin and harvested and brought it home, they [the organisation] told us that in case the pumpkins are spoiled then we have to cut, and they will again buy from us. We planted around an acre, but the intensive sunshine spoiled the crops. We followed their instructions; we harvested the pumpkin. They will come and buy the pumpkin, but they never came, and the pumpkin rotted at home. As you know, if you harvest pumpkins and put them together for like 2-3 months, they will get rotten, and that is where we get lost' (F-5). The 'getting lost' that the discussant describes evokes the haunting power of interventions which can persist long after the interventions themselves have been abandoned (Lea, 2025).

Sociologist Avery Gordon describes haunting as 'an animated state … when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive' (2008, p. xvi). These unkept promises, inconsistencies and communication failures are not simply forgotten – they linger, shaping refugees' expectations, hopes, and everyday decision-making. In this sense, the organisation's failures linger in the participants' lived experiences, quietly reminding them of what has been left unresolved and ignored.

Repatriation

A third interpretation and justification for cuts was that it was, perhaps, a way to indirectly coerce return. In the past, from a regional, geopolitical perspective, humanitarian and state actors have used cuts to basic assistance to prompt people to return to their point of origin (or at least to leave the hosting area). For example, in the 1980s, reductions in GFA in southern Sudan were one of the tactics used to prompt Ugandans to return. 'By August 1984, the problem of hunger was becoming especially serious in the older settlements where food aid had been withdrawn' (Crisp, 1986c, p. 174). The withdrawal of food aid, combined with direct attacks on camp residents, meant that 'for refugees suffering in this way, anything was better than the prospect of indefinite exile' (Crisp, 1986c, p. 174). Many staff interpreted the underpinning logic of the contemporary prioritisation in a similar way. Senior WFP staff members explained: 'This approach is not entirely new to WFP. The terminology may be different, but this has happened for refugees in the past… After some time, especially with IDPs, people go back and settle, so with time, assistance is removed' (I-137). Simon Juach, then South Sudanese Ambassador to Uganda, told concerned South Sudanese audience members in Arua City that the implied message of the cuts is that 'you are being told to go home' (O-13).

It is important to remember that for South Sudanese people, suggestions that they should return go directly against formal institutional guidance. UNHCR continues to advise against return, with levels of displacement and food insecurity surpassing those witnessed during the 2013 and 2016 conflicts (UNHCR, 2024a). Currency collapse, above average prices for sorghum, maize and other staple crops and flooding are among several devastating issues co-existing with political insecurity, severely limiting prospects for safety and stability in the country. In 2023, approximately 9.4 million people in South Sudan (76% of the country's total population)

required aid (UN Habitat, 2023, p. 2), and 2.3 million South Sudanese individuals remain displaced across international borders (UNHCR, 2023g).

Ultimately, framing the cuts as a way to prompt faster returns seems less plausible. There is evidence that some refugee groups residing in settlements in south-west Uganda did move to Kenya but they were then repatriated by UNHCR to Uganda (Wafula and Awori, 2023). At the same time, instability in South Sudan remains high. Though it may not have been official strategy, for many, repatriation or onwards travel, no matter how risky, is seen as one of the few remaining options in a context offering few alternatives. A staff member of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, one of the major funding channels for humanitarian support in Uganda, recognised that in another country, the arrival of 140-150,000 refugees would constitute a major emergency. By contrast, in Uganda, funding levels and donor expectations remained largely unchanged despite the scale of arrivals from DRC, South Sudan and Sudan (O-14). Speaking anonymously, several senior operational and technical staff referred to the risk management strategies that underpin donor interpretations of events. As long as, from their perspective, the picture does not deteriorate markedly – for example, triggering mass starvation or mass movement across borders – the status quo is unfortunate, but tolerable. In that sense, they felt they could interpret prioritisation as a success, whereby success is reduced to the avoidance of worst-case scenarios. These quietly acknowledged realities are made possible in part by the 'technologies of invisibility' that unfold in the everyday negotiations of life as refugees, and which are often enabled by the adaptive choices made by refugees themselves in the absence of structural change.

Silences and technologies of invisibilisation

In his Foucauldian analysis of governmentality as it played out in Brazil's HIV/AIDS prevention campaign, Biehl proposes the concept 'technologies of invisibility'. The concept captures the 'bureaucratic procedures, informational difficulties, sheer medical neglect and moral contempt, and unresolved disputes over diagnostic criteria' as mediating processes of invisibilisation, whereby 'people are turned into "absent things"' (2005, p. 259). While the Brazilian state drove a purportedly successful commitment to HIV/AIDS prevention, Biehl documents the state's simultaneous systematic neglect of the most marginalised sections of society who lived with and who were most at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Laura Hammond (2008) built on this framing

to argue that a government-led programme of permanent relocation, which sought to improve the life chances of people from food-insecure areas of the central and eastern highlands of Ethiopia to the western lowlands, invisibilised the very population it claimed to help. Rather than addressing the conditions of their impoverishment, this high-profile campaign of purportedly voluntary resettlement overlooked the lived experiences of the people who had been resettled and actively blocked opportunities for accountability. In this case, the pervasive economic vulnerability of refugee populations has been well-documented (UNHCR *et al.*, 2020), acknowledged, and promptly undermined by the limited funding available to facilitate ongoing humanitarian relief or structural changes that might enable improved outcomes.[133]

Critical scholars of camps have drawn heavily on Foucault's notion of governmentality and biopolitics to address the ways humanitarianism seeks to manage the health, welfare, and biological lives in refugee spaces. For example, Michel Agier uses Foucauldian analysis to highlight how care and control co-constitute the modern state for security and governance purposes. Humanitarian intervention is a means of offsetting the immediate impact of conflict and disaster through an 'apparatus of power, profiling, recording, control, and enclosure' (2010, p. 42). It has been a productive space for understanding how governance and policing condition people's behaviours under particular forms of governmentality. One contemporary example of the entangled dynamics of care and control in the contemporary setting is that the very provision of relief aid requires that people register and subscribe to the biometric data collection of UNHCR and host governments, often within specific spatial configurations. While this is described as a way to efficiently structure relief and ensure that resources are distributed according to need, the act of registration subjugates the people receiving this assistance.

We should not forget, however, the limits of Foucauldian thinking, which assert statist power in humanitarian contexts, by focusing on technologies of reform and discipline through more

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[133] Claire Walkey (2019) emphasises that state administrative structures for Refugee Status Determination in Kenya were concerned with maximising authority and power, rather than specific, individualised data. Too much knowledge was associated with increased responsibility. This reading more accurately reflects historical perspectives on the colonial state, which 'only created the appearance of a bureaucratic state and did not invest in the administrative infrastructure in the way that it had in the metropole' (*ibid.*, p. 78). Likewise, for this attempt to create the appearance of rational decision making through deferral to the composite indicator and verification data undergirding categorisation.

indirect forms of intervention. Foucauldian thinking risks understating the extent to which humanitarian power also relies on brutality and sheer physical force (Weizman, 2011; Lopez *et al.*, 2015). Hanno Brankamp, drawing on his research of policing in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, argues Kakuma's 'carceral microgeographies … [rely on] brute forms of population control, aimed at disrupting sociality and suppressing the persistence of hospitable refugee spaces with militarised means' (2019, p. 188). Similarly, here, the relatively heavy presence of security forces at food distribution points following the changes to GFA and instances of forcible return, as in Chapter 4, served to remind refugees of the brute force backing up these changes.

The production of fear as a 'technology of invisibility' in this context is linked to the threat of retribution. Several interviewees detailed their attempts to challenge corruption and poor service provision. Focus group participants in both RCS and Palabek Settlement cited experiences of hostile interactions with staff in the settlements, foreclosing the possibility of structural change: 'The authorities - UNHCR, WFP - they just come to implement what has already been decided. That is why they just order and speak arrogantly that if there is no food, that means there is no food – they even ask, "Do you want food to be cut completely or do you want to be repatriated?" Some of them even talk in a very discouraging manner -if you do not want to stay in the camp, just return back to South Sudan' (F-5). This messaging is reinforced by the observed presence of sizable security forces in the initial stages of implementation (Neiman and Titeca, 2023). Threats, including exclusion, the denial of material resources and direct violence, serve to affirm the hierarchies of power, isolate structural problems, and foreclose possibilities for accountability. A further illustration of the persistent challenges of accountability in humanitarian governance at the individual level comes from one interviewee - a young man in his twenties living in Tika who had secured a temporary contract with an INGO operating in the zone. He described how, when he formally complained about the conduct of the project officers, he was promptly handed a notice letter warning that if he did not address his own misconduct, he would lose his job (I-145). I do not wish to suggest that refugees are passive in the face of such oppression. An extensive anthropological literature demonstrates the active agency of refugees in asserting spaces of political expression, sociality and belonging amidst oppressive conditions (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Malkki, 1995; Agier, 2011). Rather, my aim is to offer a detailed

description of power and control to uncover the ways that different institutions and actors exercise control over the lives and bodies of affected people.[134]

A particularly important aspect of Hammond's analysis is the ways that the poor become 'agents of their own exclusion' (2008, p. 517). Participation in these programmes was 'not wholly forced' (*ibid.*, p. 520). However, as Hammond demonstrates, while people take agential action, people make choices within constrained circumstances – a fact that celebrations of agency and empowerment tend to overlook and/or minimise. In Ethiopia, participation in the resettlement programme was often borne out of people investing hope in the speculative claims of programme instigators or feeling 'that they have no other choice than to take part' (*ibid.*). There is enormous resonance here with the ways that South Sudanese people adapt to the constrained conditions they face. Moving across borders in pursuit of livelihoods, health, and education, pursuing local opportunities for casualised labour, moving between town and settlement to secure meagre material support, and returning to the settlement to maintain one's status as a refugee – invariably, these are attempts to broaden one's life chances in the face of enormous precarity.

Omata and Gidron's study of refugee return from Uganda to South Sudan shows that these movements are not demonstrations of empowerment – rather, they are 'responses to severe hardship, and paradoxically, are deployed to sustain their life in Uganda' (2024, p. 101). As such, 'romanticising cross-border movement and household splits as innovative and empowering strategies or as manifestations of agency risks downplaying the fact that such measures are undertaken in the face of extreme adversity and come with high costs' (*ibid.*, 2024, p. 118). Just as in Ethiopia, where the architects of the resettlement scheme sought to mask the failures of their programme rather than pursue structural correction, architects of these programmes console themselves that they have managed to avoid highly visible evidence of failure. While acknowledging that they wish things could be different, they present the structural conditions of

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[134] Refugee studies scholar, Tom Scott-Smith further cautions against focusing on Foucauldian 'biopower' – the way that institutions and actors exercise control over the lives and bodies of affected people - as humanitarian readings 'risk applying this term indiscriminately, failing to define it adequately, and using it as a substitute for detailed descriptions of power and control' (2014, pp. 22-23).

displacement as intractable. This comes at great cost to beneficiaries who are chastised and are suspended in the mechanics of bureaucracy.

Affective regulation

Earlier studies in the Uganda-southern Sudan borderscape observed that agency staff believed their programming was working despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary (Allen, 1993, p. 222). Instead, here, technocrats and street-level bureaucrats deflect the power to change things beyond themselves. When faced with complaints, humanitarian aid workers sometimes acknowledge to beneficiaries that their conditions are less than ideal. Corrective action, which would address the scarcity of food and lack of services, is constantly delayed, but, as outlined above, practitioners appeal to refugees to have 'patience'. In doing so, they arbitrarily construct refugees' circumstances as temporary conditions. They create a space of moral suspension whereby the resolution of a given issue is deferred. Though there are no promises of change or even of feedback, the deferral of bureaucratic resolution produces indeterminacy.

Anthropologist Monique Nuijten (2003, p. 6) described Mexican state bureaucracy as a 'hope-generating machine' – one in which the bureaucracy 'never says no and creates great expectations' while ultimately leaving many promises unfulfilled. In these instances, the humanitarian infrastructure in Uganda could be described in much the same way. Dorothea Hilhorst cites a 2018 presentation by Oliver Bakewell concerning Angolan refugees in Zambia who maintained their case files in the hope of being one of the select few to resettle in a third country. In turn, Hilhorst (2020) concurs that exploring how advice for asylum seekers to keep their heads down and behave as an impeachable resident in the hope of receiving a residency permit serves as a convenient deterrent against collective action and dissent.

When asked directly about these recourses to temporal deferral, humanitarian workers operating within the settlement justified these recourses to patience through hope. As a sub-regional UNHCR health officer put it, 'We need to keep their hopes up' (I-155). A research officer in Kampala observed that those in Category 3, regardless of their level of vulnerability, have no hope of receiving any assistance (I-142). Staff of UN agencies working closely with settlements suggested that the hopelessness refugees were experiencing because of the prioritisation exercise was compounding anecdotal trends of increases in serious mental distress, including suicide

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attempts, following earlier cuts to rations (Bukuluki *et al.,* 2021; Bwesige and Snider, 2021). While Uganda's suicide dashboard currently does not indicate a clear uptick in suicides, it likely underestimates both actual and attempted cases, particularly given persistent staffing constraints, reporting delays, and the stigma surrounding mental health. Although available data remain limited, anecdotal reports from settlements suggest that distress and self-harm may be increasing in response to cuts in assistance, economic precarity, and uncertainty about the future. Similar observations have been made in relation to the effects of recent food cuts in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. In their recent article in *The New Humanitarian,* Bakewell *et al.* (2025) noted that among those they spoke to 'almost everyone said suicides are on the rise'. In contexts of severe mental distress, tightly linked to socio-economic conditions of refuge, these discursive acts, whereby existential structural challenges are glossed over by recourses to patience and hope, turn humanitarian-refugee engagements into violent encounters of liminality. As Torre observes, reflecting on the chosen slogan of World Mental Health Day in Palabek, 'Think Positive: Save a Life', psychocentric approaches produce narratives which 'disregard the impact of socio-economic elements on refugees' mental health … devoid of systemic and structural determinants' (2023, p. 129). Over time, refugees experience these temporal disjunctures as abandonment and isolation. In speech, refugees are encouraged to hope and patiently wait for better feedback from humanitarian agencies; in practice, recourse to the possibility of change obfuscates the lack of action in the immediate context.

In the process, humanitarian actors simultaneously acknowledge the challenges facing South Sudanese people and responsibilise them for mitigating the worst effects of the absence of formal protection infrastructures. This occurs both through individualised notions of responsibility and through localisation agendas, which devolve responsibility for key community services. While empowerment is widely promoted at an individual, household and community level, it is also a way to delegate care and reduce costs (Easton-Calabria, 2020; Duffield, 2015; Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015). A poignant example of this emerged in Imvepi, where, during a maternal death audit, UN staff advised members of the village health team to continue with their volunteer work in the absence of material support. A sub-regional UNHCR staff member 'I want to encourage you [the Village Health Worker], the incentives may not be there, but the

benefits are far-reaching – generation after generation'. Unwaged labour serves to paper over the cracks in the neoliberal humanitarian infrastructure (Brown and Chiavaroli, 2023).

These moralising discourses limit the space for expression by South Sudanese persons. 'Refugees' are blamed for 'inaction'; meanwhile, the inaction of donors and staff on the ground in the settlements is a condition that is to be tolerated with inordinate patience. The temporality of humanitarian action and inaction plays a major role in creating this dynamic. Patience, or the repeated deferral of basic needs and desires, in this sense, is a virtue. Meanwhile, the expression of the slightest frustration, dissatisfaction and anger is used to legitimate racialised and ethnicised discourses of dismissal. Authority figures portray South Sudanese people as a moral other and thus justify their mistreatment. There is a pervasive sense that the developmental and humanitarian experience is interpreted as an opportunity to rehabilitate refugees, to manage their characters – for example, teaching South Sudanese people to 'manage their temperatures' and 'learn not to fight' were widely repeated sentiments by UN staff, police, local councillors, and government staff. To offer an example, at the start of the maternal death audit in Imvepi, a Ugandan, the in-charge, opened, 'I have personally witnessed two or three audits that reached boiling point'. He continued, 'Personally, I have not seen the faces that are prone to enter this state'. To which, the UNHCR and government representatives laughed (O-1). Staff of international institutions, government bureaucrats, and refugee leaders alike deployed thinly veiled references to 'problem' populations, most typically referring to Dinka and Nuer populations. Instances of reactive anger and frustration by individual refugees were used to justify wider practices of neglect for populations.

In turn, humanitarian and government staff used these experiences to justify their distancing from populations needing vital resources and to justify their lack of responsiveness to oftentimes legitimate concerns. For example, in the aftermath of the September 2020 incident, interviewees reported being told by key protection staff that refugees first needed to think about their own 'behaviours' and 'hostile' attitudes if they wanted partner organisations to continue operating in the zone (I-127). These sentiments become a way to assert divisive logics of control through the

exclusion of 'unreasonable' and 'undesirable' persons.[135] These comments reflected prejudicial ideas about particular South Sudanese ethnic groups – particularly Dinka and Nuer - who are stereotyped as being quick to anger, leading staff to treat certain groups with suspicion or to justify differential treatment. To further illustrate the frequency of these comments in relatively public forums, in the NRC stakeholder workshop in October 2022 (O-5), a city social worker and landlord with South Sudanese tenants stated, 'My refugee brothers and sisters come with their culture' and their 'bad behaviours'.

Faced with this stereotyping, refugees are far from naïve. In the same workshop, a refugee representative spoke up, insisting that 'you cannot characterise all of us as having bad behaviours'. Several South Sudanese interlocutors expressed their willingness to openly defy these attempts to govern through affect. Taking on the notion that South Sudanese people are quick to anger, one interlocutor reflected, 'why would I want to be like them, and just accept what comes in front of me, when it is not right' (I-132). This statement turns the moralisation of anger as an emotion on its head and centres their anger as a vital act of resistance. It is important to recognise the risks that this stance may require.

The prejudicial characterisations which follow expressions of anger are tightly linked to regional and racialised moralisations of the expression of emotions and the inculcation of particular affective atmospheres (Ahmed, 2014; Anderson, 2009). Monteith writes of the importance of affective management as Nakasero market in Kampala functions as a 'social institution' which has the potential to inculcate 'good' and 'bad' hearts en masse. For Monteith (2016), the heart is a moral and social symbol of the moral character constructed in dialogue with particular ethical values, with important implications for the potential for wider insecurity and disorder. To express anger or annoyance outwardly and directly is to have a bitter heart, a symbolic currency that is used to structure action and prompt a turn towards community ideals. In Nakasero market, these are entangled with economic calculations and the distribution of resources amidst 'struggle'. Concerns with the heart and character also have a wider resonance with the production of state control. The production of affective control through the racialised

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[135] These acts have global resonance, see Bhatia (2020) and Elsrud's (2023) observations of how street-level bureaucrats rationalise and met out cruelty against asylum seekers in Britain and Sweden.

distribution of sensibilities, 'around assessments of affective dispositions and their beneficent and dangerous political affects' was an insidious tool of colonial governance (Stoler, 2007, p. 5). Recent work has developed this in relation to contemporary state structures of oppression, whereby emotions are deployed as instrumental organising tools for enacting bureaucratic agendas (Vrabiescu and Anderson, 2023).

By portraying the complaints of South Sudanese people as evidence of uneducated, overly emotional, or violent characteristics, rather than legitimate complaints, aid workers reproduce and entrench inequality. Ultimately, these dismissive reflections on individual or collective character perpetuate a particular neoliberal humanitarian moral order whereby a person's individual actions in resolving or insufficiently resolving an issue can be richly scrutinised. Yet, the highly unequal structural conditions engendering these conditions go unaddressed. These dynamics can be situated in relation to neoliberal capitalism's moral matrix, which disguises exploitative accumulation relationships through the disciplining and regulation of the behaviour of subject populations (Wiegratz *et al.,* 2024; Duffield, 2002).

Producing power

The assertion of power is a project that begins with refugees' very first encounters with the humanitarian infrastructure (see also Nakueira, 2022, pp. 36-38). An example of one South Sudanese man's experience of registration in 2024 illuminates how the entrenchment of established structures of power begins as soon as people encounter the settlement. Allegations of widespread fraud and corruption in Uganda are not new (Okiror, 2018; NRC, 2023), but the everyday and intractable power of staff over refugees even from the first days of registration, serves as a potent reminder of the Janus-faced performance of the humanitarian infrastructure whereby international organisations and aid agencies become proponents of custodial oversight and abuses of state power in displacement (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 2005; Duffield, 2004).

Jimmy, a man in his mid-twenties from Bahr el Ghazal in South Sudan, arrived for the first time in Uganda and then travelled to Ocea reception centre in March 2024. He arrived with over thirty other people, mostly children, from a village ensnared in inter-community conflict, in hopes of avoiding the ongoing violence and accessing education. During the registration process, volunteer translators repeatedly told Jimmy that there were network challenges and so OPM

were unable to complete the registration process. After several days of hearing the same thing and simultaneously seeing other families moving through the systems, he once again returned to the desk to ascertain the root of the problem. In the reception centre, posters alerting refugees to the criminality of those demanding bribes for services that are supposed to be free plaster office walls, doors, and signposts. Excuses like this often compound until those seeking to register catch on to the implied exchange. Those in positions of power deployed time as a resource by which to solicit bribes (Blundo and de Sardan, 2006, pp. 90-91). In this instance, the translator openly stated that if Jimmy really wanted to complete the registration process, then he would need to pay 100,000 UGX per person.

Seeking support from connections who were more familiar with the intricate politics of life in the settlement, Jimmy raised a complaint. These efforts proved futile. Jimmy recounted, 'We tried to report the case to OPM and UNHCR, and there was no help.' UNHCR staff in Arua requested evidence of the corruption. Having provided screenshots and recordings of the interactions, Jimmy was informed that UNHCR would follow the case. With delayed feedback and the discomfort of life in the reception centre, Jimmy decided to pay the bribe. Jimmy, and those he arrived with managed to relocate to their plot three weeks after they had first arrived in Ocea. The same person who had paid for their transportation from South Sudan facilitated the exchange. 'We just lost our money like that … We were received and addressed by the partners, and they never showed up when we needed them the most. They told us that bribing is something that they can never tolerate, and yet when we were busy looking for help, they never showed up… I had to bribe the workers just to register. We negotiated until we paid 50,000 UGX per person. There were so many involved in the same deal' (I-160).

This account illustrates the underhanded deferrals of action, which can stretch registration out over several weeks. Staff in the reception centre informed me just weeks prior to Jimmy's arrival that refugees would only spend a matter of days in the reception centre (I-162). Even then, they received threats from those in the reception centre that if they did not pay more, their food would be cut off, instilling further fear and uncertainty among the newly arrived households. Eventually, after the family had been relocated to their registered zone, UNHCR followed up by interviewing the family. It is unclear if any further action was taken. For Jimmy and his family, the perceived lack of action by UNHCR, was an indication that accountability was unattainable.

As Jimmy put it, 'Refugee life is so complicated. It is full of hidden politics or games between the government, UNHCR, and WFP' (I-160).

Conclusion

In a world of constrained and rapidly evaporating aid funding, it is reasonable to argue for equitable distribution arrangements. However, constrained by inadequate data and limited donor funding, the resulting system of differentiated assistance produced confusion, distress, and frustration. Through an examination of Phase III of the prioritisation exercise rolled out in Uganda from July 2023, the chapter raised serious concerns about the legitimacy of pursuing differentiated assistance amidst overwhelmingly high levels of need and highly changeable household circumstances. It has argued that the exercise, which aimed to target households with the highest level of need, weakened vital survival infrastructures, including forms of interdependence and mutual support, with severe material and physiological consequences.

In the second half of the chapter, through an examination of the ways that humanitarian and government staff and refugees alike sought to make sense of the policy, I have argued that the refugee infrastructure in Uganda is managed through 'technologies of invisibilisation' (Biehl, 2005; Hammond, 2008). Through denial, silence, deferral, affective regulation, and the threat of brute force, the humanitarian infrastructure enacts coalescing forms of violence against South Sudanese people. Meanwhile, transparency and accountability over large-scale changes to assistance are reserved for the purview of those in on the performance.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This chapter highlights the overall contributions of the thesis. It then offers reflections on four key themes: humanitarian violence, (im)mobility, multiple displacements, and mutuality. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the resonance of these findings with recent developments in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya.

Introduction

Through an in-depth examination of the experiences of refugees self-settled in a secondary city in Uganda, drawing on interviews, observations, archival records, and policy documents, this thesis contributes multi-scalar empirical material to examine the overlooked ways South Sudanese people navigate the liminal spaces of humanitarian policy in West Nile, Uganda. It makes several core contributions to critical refugee and humanitarian studies. Firstly, it offers a novel contribution through its focus on a secondary city. Despite hosting sizeable and growing refugee populations, secondary cities, which are often mid-sized and rapidly growing urban areas in their own right, are largely absent from the refugee studies literature. In doing so, this thesis also highlights a complex web of actors that play important roles in rendering refuge viable. Beyond the familiar constellation of humanitarian agencies, (I)NGOs and state institutions, a range of figures often overlooked in refugee studies – landlords, headteachers, medical practitioners, neighbours – emerge prominently. Focusing on this setting, therefore, offers new empirical insights and a reframing of how refuge is produced beyond the well-studied poles of camps and capital cities. In foregrounding this, I argue for a more spatially attentive refugee scholarship that recognises secondary cities and towns as critical sites in the evolving landscape of displacement and protection.

Focusing on residents of Arua City, the thesis shows how, through mobility, refugees maintain stretched bureaucratic, financial, and relational ties with the refugee settlement, long after they have moved away (Chapters 5 and 7). Tracing the experiences of self-settled refugees has also produced a counter-mapping of the formal humanitarian infrastructure, where in self-settlement, experiences of the settlement loom large, conditioning how people narrate their sense of belonging in Uganda (Chapters 4 and 7). Through close examination of Arua's emergence as an urban centre, formatively shaped by migration (Chapter 3) and South Sudanese people's lived experiences of integration (Chapters 5 and 7), we see how migration continues to contribute in

formative ways to the development of the City itself. While at the city level, government officials engage in piecemeal ways with their migrant residents (Chapter 6), individual and household level interactions highlight landlords, headteachers, medical practitioners, market traders, and neighbours as prominent figures in their experiences of self-settlement.

This concluding chapter offers final reflections. First, it connects the findings with a growing literature on humanitarian violence. Then, it stresses the need to draw refugee contexts into wider conversations about both (im)mobility and urban dispossession. Then, it discusses the significance of mutuality in the particular context of West Nile. The last section reflects on the ongoing evisceration of humanitarian funding, the resonance of these findings beyond Uganda. It draws out similarities in experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and in Kenya by reflecting on what happens 'when the people who are meant to be invisible show up' (Gordon, 2011, p. 2) and demand change.

Silence and violence

These findings resonate with a growing body of literature that critiques the global deployment of self-reliance as a politically expedient discourse, one that externalises responsibility for refugee welfare while obscuring the structural constraints refugees face, including access to arable land and livelihoods (Ilcan *et al.*, 2015; Easton-Calabria, 2020). Far from benign, as argued in Chapter 3, the self-reliance agenda is deeply racialised, positioning refugees, particularly those from the global majority, as responsible for their own survival, even when the conditions for that survival are systematically undermined. This thesis moves beyond linear, policy-driven accounts of displacement, instead tracing the recursive and cumulative effects of bureaucratic violence, often enacted through silences, absences, and stalled promises. This slow violence is compounded by symbolic violence, as humanitarian practitioners attribute refugees' agricultural 'failures' to personal inadequacy, rather than recognising the ecological and structural impossibility of farming in overused or infertile land. In this context, humanitarian governance becomes a site of both affective and material regulation. Chapters 4, 7, and 8 show how affect is mobilised as a technology of governance—structuring who is seen as deserving, who is rendered disposable, and how empathy is stratified within the everyday. Across these domains, the analysis foregrounds how power circulates through both material infrastructures and intimate, emotional registers, shaping refugee life in ways that demand renewed ethical and political scrutiny.

The bureaucratic architecture of aid sustains what Lopez *et al.* (2015) term 'multiple humanitarian presents'—overlapping, fragmented temporalities that structure the lived experience of displacement. These fractured timescapes obscure lines of accountability and render suffering simultaneously hyper-visible and politically illegible. Such fragmentation is not anomalous but indicative of a broader historical trajectory of institutionalised abandonment. It is symptomatic of a humanitarian system that denies its own violence while depending on it for operational coherence. As Gordon (2008, p. 8) aptly put it, 'what appears to be not there is often a seething presence'. The thesis engages with how oppression is enacted and reasserted in humanitarian settings. Violence is operationalised through both state withdrawal *and* state intervention. Discursive self-reliance creates a social space of what Davies *et al.* describe as violent (in)action, with 'stark, material, and bodily consequences' (2017, p. 1264). As further affirmed by Chapter 8 of this thesis, this manifests in bureaucratic delays and performative prioritisation exercises that normalise suffering and even make abandonment appear as a logistical necessity. Brankamp underscores that humanitarianism cannot be divorced from its 'systemic alignment with power', particularly state power, which reinforces practices that elevate some lives over others, produce precarious subjectivities, and spatially fix refugees within administrative spaces (2019, p. 282; see also, Daley, 2013). As also indicated in this thesis, such repression has material consequences—it exacerbates precarity, reinforces spatial and racial hierarchies, and sustains a system that prioritises operational efficiency over ethical responsibility. Despite its celebrated policy framework, the humanitarian order in northern Uganda is also underpinned by the force of direct violence (Chapters 4 and Chapter 8).

As Gordon (2011, p. 2) notes, hauntings are sustained 'when their oppressive nature is continuously denied'. The notion of policy hauntology becomes especially salient in this context. What emerges is a humanitarianism haunted by its own contradictions: a system that promises protection while enabling harm, and increasingly relies on the very state powers it once claimed to mitigate. The justification of inaction and abandonment runs parallel to direct action, both of which serve as instruments of control. The violent suppression of dissent and civil disobedience manifests in multiple forms, including direct assault, state complicity, and the silencing of those who challenge the status quo (see also Torre, 2023; O'Byrne, 2022; Ibreck *et al.*, 2024). This thesis aligns with scholars who highlight not just the biopolitical implications of international aid

but also the direct violence underpinning the containment of refugees. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how refugee governance operates within a system that reinforces state sovereignty while simultaneously reproducing harm and injustice.

Brun (2016) argues that humanitarianism, as currently practised, lacks a future—it is reactive, short-term, and disconnected from the political and structural causes of displacement. For refugee protection to move forward, it must embrace politicised forms of justice: integration, representation, and the dismantling of displacement-producing structures. Without genuinely participatory approaches—in research, programming, and beyond—there can be no real transformation. This is hardly a novel call. A key theme throughout this research was the extent to which conditions such as malnutrition, suicide, and child labour persist in this model refugee-hosting context (Brown and Torre, 2024). As Harrell-Bond noted in 1986, when a medical worker in Algeria told her, 'it was food, not medicine, which would save the lives of… malnourished children' (p. 203), the lesson was clear then, as it is now: material needs must be prioritised over lofty discourse which obscure the fact that many refugees cannot grow, buy, or access food.

Reckoning with (im)mobility

This thesis has demonstrated how Uganda's humanitarian bureaucracy extends its reach across space, producing complex patterns of onward movement and entanglement. It demonstrates that camps, settlements, and cities are not isolated domains but spatially diverse infrastructural forms that must be read in relation to one another, and always in context. As Sanyal (2014, p. 559) argues, these spatialities can and should be used to 'interrogate each other'. This thesis embraces that invitation, showing how settlement and city function as interrelated and uneven geographies shaped by bureaucratic entanglements, infrastructural inequalities, and shifting modes of governance. Drawing on a mobile method, the analysis presented in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 7 challenges the often-siloed spatial imaginaries of displacement scholarship. Rather than treating camps, settlements, and cities as discrete and bounded spaces, this research traces the lived and infrastructural continuities between them, defying the linear, bounded imaginaries of statist bureaucracies. In doing so, the research highlights the ways that refugees often interface with complex webs of actors beyond the humanitarian infrastructure, including landlords, health centres, schools, neighbours, and market traders.

The dialectical relationship, embodied by South Sudanese movements, between these spaces unsettles conventional binaries and reveals the material and relational practices that sustain life, agency, and solidarity across displacement geographies. By employing movement as a method—not only to follow refugees' trajectories between settlement and city but also to interrogate the spatial and political architectures that shape these journeys—the thesis takes up Neto's (2019) call to treat mobility not merely as an object of analysis but as an embodied and methodological imperative. In doing so, it also responds to Kaiser's (2006) critique of fixed spatial categories in West Nile, foregrounding the interconnectivity of displacement geographies. In doing so, the analysis presents a relational and situated understanding of refuge that accounts for both its infrastructural foundations and its affective and bureaucratic dimensions—ultimately advancing a more nuanced and mobile conceptualisation of displacement. Rather than treating mobility as inherently liberatory, this thesis adopts a balanced approach, one that is attuned to its undesired, inconvenient, and coercive dimensions. It normalises migration, while also asking why people move, under what conditions, and with what constraints. It recognises immobility not as the absence of movement, but as a form of structural violence, where people are dispossessed in place through entrapment, eviction, and exclusion. In theorising these dynamics, this thesis contributes to debates on sedentary (Bakewell, 2008a) and mobility bias (Lubkemann, 2008) in forced migration studies, arguing that both movement and stasis must be analysed in relation to the structures that shape them. It advances a spatially and politically grounded understanding of refuge that centres the dialectic between bureaucratic reach and everyday navigation; between the desire to move, the desire to stay and the reality of being stuck.

These dynamics play out across the uneven geographies of Arua's settlement and city spaces, where people are simultaneously made visible for the purposes of resource mobilisation and rendered invisible in processes of decision-making and resource allocation (Chapters 4 and 5). Theoretical insights from geographer Ash Amin are useful here. Taking an expansive spatial lens permits not 'a weakened sense of place, but a heterotopic sense of place that is no longer reducible to regional moorings or to a territorially confined public sphere but is made up of influences that fold together the culturally plural and the geographically proximate and distant' (2004, p. 37). This conceptualisation is borne out in the empirical material, which reveals how

people inhabit spaces of refuge through layered affiliations, historical residues, and practical improvisations that exceed official spatial logics.

Displaceability and dispossession

Romola Sanyal (2014, p. 558) argues that 'populations of refugees and the urban poor often have much in common as marginal populations within the urban environment'. In contexts where 'basic minimum standards for refuge compete and collude with the poverty of the urban margins', the distinction between the precariously situated refugee and citizen poor becomes increasingly blurred, not in legal terms, but in lived experience. As Cabot and Ramsay (2021, p. 286) argue, displacement has too often been treated as 'an exceptional event, a pathological state of being', primarily associated with forced mobility. Yet in contexts like Arua, where both refugees and citizens navigate exclusion from land, services, and stable housing, displacement appears not as the exception but as a normative experience, entangling people in chronic instability regardless of their legal status. The similarity of conditions across social categories points to what they call 'regimes of displacement that are as violent as they are unexceptional' (*ibid.*).

This thesis has made a deliberate effort to attend to the commonalities and nuances of both citizen and non-citizen experiences in urban environments, where nationals and non-national populations inhabit overlapping social, economic, and spatial spheres. This approach challenges the often rigid distinction between 'refugees' and 'host communities,' revealing how refugees are embedded within broader urban processes and struggles. The findings of Chapter 7 point, in important ways, to highly gendered experiences of eviction and exclusion. Recognising where similarities exist regardless of legal status is critical because it allows us to understand how both groups navigate, often concurrently, the same precarious conditions of urban life, from inadequate housing and evictions to exclusion from public services and political representation, pointing to the ongoing need for research and policy that extends beyond categories (Bakewell, 2008b). It also creates space to acknowledge what is distinctive about the ways particular South Sudanese people are treated and the implications this differential treatment has for their lives. For instance, refugees may experience additional layers of vulnerability due to their legal status, restricted rights, and exclusion from local political processes. By focusing on these shared struggles, this work illuminates what is particular to the internationally displaced, such as the

legal, bureaucratic, and humanitarian frameworks that shape their existence, as well as the differences within 'refugee' experiences.

It also moves beyond viewing refugees as homogeneous populations, recognising the diverse positionalities they contend with in their situated contexts through considerations of gender, economic resources, and relational networks. In particular, the thesis has examined the politics of financialised inclusion within Arua's urban arena. Historically shaped by layered forms of displacement and marginalisation (Chapter 3), Arua provides a case through which to interrogate the ways that urban development, governance, and humanitarian intervention intersect (Chapters 5 and 6). Rather than facilitating meaningful empowerment, urban interventions that ostensibly target vulnerable groups unevenly entrench the marginalisation of displaced populations. These dynamics mirror broader national trends, whereby the state instrumentalises the presence of refugees to attract international funding and legitimacy, while little is done to improve their material conditions (Chapter 6).

The analysis suggests a need for critical caution regarding actors who espouse discourses of inclusivity and representativity without adequately addressing the political and economic contexts in which they operate (Chapters 5 and 6). Grappling fully with these dynamics would require further investigation; as such, I raise these points as areas for deeper inquiry. As proposed by Oren Yiftachel, drawing further on concepts such as 'displaceability', which he defines as 'the state of being susceptible to involuntary distancing from [the metropolitan's] rights and resources' (2020, pp. 154-155), rather than displacement per se, might be a productive way to further interrogate this data. Doing so would require deeper engagement with the ways that Ugandan citizens also experience these distancing processes in Arua.

Mutuality

By tracing both the extended reach and the absences of humanitarian infrastructure, this thesis foregrounds the rich social and material practices through which life in displacement is sustained, contributing to broader literature on multiple humanitarianisms and the potential for locally embedded forms of protection, such as the 'politics of hospitality' (Agier, 2011) and 'communities of response' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). As highlighted by Chapter 7, within this landscape of absence and improvisation, mutuality emerges not as a utopian ideal but as a

situated and often necessary practice. These forms of collective care are deeply shaped by the long histories of dispossession and statist neglect that characterise the region. As Wendy James (1988) suggests through her concept of the 'moral archive', ethical frameworks are not handed down from formal institutions, but are built over time through embodied memory, shared struggle, and recurring encounters with instability. For James, moral reasoning is not static or solely dictated by external authority; rather, it is built cumulatively through everyday encounters and long-standing social memory, the accumulated grammar of social life. This archive is what enables people to navigate relationships across difference, including those that might otherwise seem improbable or fraught due to histories of violence or ethnic antagonism. It is this archive, sedimented through history and reshaped through displacement, that enables the conditional absorption of strangers and fosters the possibility of cohabitation even in contexts of historic antagonism. In northern Uganda, where memories of cross-border violence, land alienation, and militarised encounters remain vivid, it is striking that such moral logics still allow for gestures of inclusion, however precarious they may be.

As this thesis has demonstrated, the narrative of 'self-reliance' and the institutional architectures that uphold it have profound structuring effects on the lived realities of refugees, often undermining the very mechanisms of care and support it purports to strengthen. Survival, as evidenced throughout this research, is rarely enacted in isolation. Whether the young people, single-member households, who rely on their new neighbours for shared residence, mothers requesting payment extensions from headteachers (Chapter 5) or families on the cusp of eviction who receive food from their neighbours (Chapter 7), survival unfolds through dense, often fragile networks of care, reciprocity, and interdependence. Yet these everyday strategies must also be understood in relation to the thinly veiled operations of power. These absences— whether in the form of unfulfilled state obligations, delayed aid, or the quiet withdrawal of support—exert real force in people's lives, conditioning the terms of survival and belonging.

In this context, mutuality is both an ethical response and a political one. It arises in the absence of coordinated care, and it makes possible forms of survival that are not captured in dominant metrics of resilience or independence. Rather than a simple celebration of community, these practices offer alternative vocabularies of inclusion—ones that recognise social worth through care, coexistence, and moral personhood, rather than institutional recognition or biometric

legibility. The privatised forms of care that emerge through landlord-tenant relationships, informal housing negotiations, and neighbourly reciprocity are infused with their own horizons of control and precarity. Still, they also represent significant ways in which people make themselves meaningful to one another. These everyday practices suggest that even in deeply fragmented urban environments, people draw on moral repertoires that complicate narrow notions of inclusion or state-led integration (Chapter 7). In attending to these dynamics, this thesis calls for a more empirically grounded, politically aware understanding of what sustains life in displacement, not as an individual achievement, but as a collective negotiation of dignity in constrained circumstances.

The valorisation of community participation and self-reliance in policy discourse serves to mask the precariousness of the infrastructures refugees actually depend on—what might more accurately be described as fragile mutuality. This research foregrounds the limitations of a framework of 'self-reliance' which positions refugees as individualised economic agents, showing instead how people build life through fragile, often improvised, structures of collective support that are both relational and deeply contextual. This archive of mutuality—quiet, contingent, and often ignored by formal systems—points to the possibility of cohabitation beyond the limits of institutional categories. It provides a framework through which people navigate moral personhood, not through static identities, but through their ability to 'stay well with others', contribute, and endure. It points to the need to attend to different actors, including landlord-tenant relationships, often framed as exploitative, which also emerge here as complex sites of negotiation, and sometimes, of care. A non-binary approach reveals how these relational dynamics shift with reactive humanitarian interventions, cuts to vital resources, and the slow restructuring of aid. Future research should attend more closely to the moral economies, exchanges and quiet practices of care that often go unnoticed, and, in particular, how they interface with statist infrastructures. An emphasis on mutuality should not be to the exclusion of accounting for statist bureaucratic order, as part of the negotiated tapestry of life in displacement. To this end, as highlighted in Chapters 4, 7, and 8, debt seems like a particularly productive topic of enquiry.

'Safety does not taste like sorrow'

This analysis is situated in a moment of profound crisis in the global humanitarian system. As the gap between humanitarian ideals and their enactment widens, the very notion of 'humanitarian reason' (Fassin, 2011) appears increasingly untenable. While historically framed by the duality of care and control, recent developments suggest that many states are abandoning even the pretence of care, retaining only control, containment, deterrence, and bureaucratic distancing mechanisms. The abrupt withdrawal of aid signals a fundamental erosion of the normative foundations upon which humanitarianism claims to rest. Most notably, in early 2025, the US trump administration eliminated 83% of USAID programmes (Gedeon, 2025). In 2024, the US alone provided over half of WFP's budget (WFP, 2025). Combined with reduced aid spending across European governments, this is contributing to severe gaps in vital relief services. As international aid funding collapses and donors rollback their commitments, the contemporary humanitarian regime is haunted by its own contradictions—its claims to ethical universality and solidarity coexisting with its complicity in systems of abandonment, containment, and violence.

As explored in Chapters 4 and 8, the affective and material reverberations of aid withdrawal structure the conditions of everyday life in refugee settlements. At times, this results in intense moments of confrontation, which reveal the extent to which humanitarian order is undergirded not just by biopolitical and symbolic violence but also by the iron fist of sovereignty (Graeber, 2006). The state-led response to the September 2020 incident in north-western Uganda and, more recently, the brutal suppression of refugee voices in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, illustrate how order is violently reasserted 'when the people who are meant to be invisible show up' (Gordon, 2011, p. 2).

Kakuma Refugee Camp, established in 1992 in northwestern Kenya's Turkana County, is one of Africa's largest refugee settlements, hosting over 300,000 refugees of diverse nationalities. Residents of the settlement are beset by challenges, not least precarious legal status, limited access to resources, and inadequate arable land. In 2025, the humanitarian situation in Kakuma deteriorated significantly due to substantial cuts in aid funding. WFP Kenya disseminated a message to refugee households that their food rations were being reduced to 40%, a decision which they attributed to severe funding shortfalls. In an attempt to draw attention to their suffering, thousands of refugees from diverse nationalities gathered in the settlement to voice

their frustration and desperation. They protested peacefully on February 28th and March 3rd, holding up empty cooking pots, water bottles, and signs demanding adequate food. Women and young girls made up the core group of protestors; men and boys were advised to stay home. They sang songs, held up hand-written signs, and, when needed, created space to escort a staff member into the UNHCR compound, helping to carry his luggage. The group submitted a petition to UNHCR but was dissatisfied with the response. When the protestors started to shake the barbed wire fence surrounding the compound, the response from Kenyan security forces was swift and brutal. They dispersed tear gas into the crowd. At this point, young men who had been watching from the other side of the road threw rocks at the security forces. The security forces opened fire on the crowd. The camp was subsequently placed under a curfew, UNHCR refused to confirm whether live rounds were used in the demonstration, and the refugees' plight was once again thrust out of the public eye (Ahmed, 2025).

South Sudanese poet Peter Kidi was born in Kakuma. Now in his twenties, he has known no other home. Writing in the wake of this brutal incident, his poems offer a vehicle for articulating the 'elusive concreteness of ghostly matter' (Gordon, 2008, p. 196) – the ways that haunting works on and through people. In *The Forgotten Faces,* Kidi (2025c) offers up the pain of being caught between spaces and identities. 'We came in ninety-two, shadows of war, / Feet dragging on soil unknown before. / Guns behind us, hunger ahead, / Yet we built Kakuma—brick by thread / … / They promised safety, they spoke of peace, / Yet time has only chained, not freed. / Food grew scarce, water ran dry, / Who listened when our children cried? / They spoke of integration—a life renewed, / But tell me, how do you erase the roots?' *The Forgotten Faces* serves as a stark reminder of the precarious and volatile existence that many refugees face, and whose calls for justice are often met with violence or indifference. Similar themes emerged in Uganda. The promises of safety, peace, and integration go unfulfilled and hunger is what remains. As one focus group participant in Palabek put it, the hunger experienced as a refugee 'is more painful than gunshots since gunshots can be dodged, but with hunger you cannot dodge it' (F-6). This powerful reflection puts the threat of starvation in a foreign land, and the threat of injury and even death from conflict in South Sudan in direct contrast.

As in Chapter 8, when refugee populations raise the question of what they should eat, they are told to have patience, a disorienting reminder of their institutional irrelevance. In *Betrayed from*

Within, Kidi writes, 'They cut our food, they dry our wells, / Yet tell us, "Wait, all will be well." / Mothers beg, children starve, / Bellies empty, bodies carved. / Water trickles, barely a sip, / A fight at the tap, blood on the drip. / Meetings, meetings—talk, delay, / Papers stack but rot away' (2025b). This imagery carries not only the lived weight of food insecurity but also evokes the deafening silence that refugees experience in response to their complaints. He highlights the often-overlooked dimensions of refugee existence—the silenced voices of those living in a space where their humanity is constantly denied. Time becomes a chain, a form of erasure and containment. Chains, shadows, death, and smothering, these are the metaphors of life under refuge. *Cries in the Dust* further expands on these themes: 'We marched with empty stomachs, / our shadows thinner than our hope, / our feet carving pleas into the dust, / but the wind swallowed our voices whole'. Reading Kidi's work, I was viscerally reminded of the ways South Sudanese in West Nile recounted their experiences of displacement in September 2020, as outlined in Chapter 4. Claims that humanitarian agencies are creating spaces of safety, protection, and economic possibility in Uganda become vehicles for trauma. 'Safe haven[s]' become painful reminders of the shortcomings of humanitarian protection. As Kidi reflected, 'safety does not taste like sorrow' (2025a).

Weeks after the violence, the Kenyan government, donor agencies, and international institutions publicly celebrated the Shirika plan—purportedly, a 'groundbreaking initiative' that promises to dismantle some of the legal barriers to integration, with the aim of facilitating the inclusion of refugees in public service delivery and community development (UNHCR, 2025). It promises pathways to employment and education for refugees. In doing so, it echoes the promises of Uganda's comprehensive refugee response. The plan discursively raises the prospect of a durable solution to the protracted refugee crisis, where refugees can be more effectively incorporated into local economies and societies. These celebrations seem a far cry from the reality in Kakuma. As Kidi put it in his plea for the most basic acknowledgement, 'Or must we die a thousand times / before you whisper our names?' (2025a).

This recent incident of brutal suppression in Kakuma refugee camp underscores the need to engage more seriously with the full continuum of violence that undergirds humanitarian order, despite claims of progressive refugee frameworks. Without a sustained engagement with the multiple registers of violence and uneven textures of power experienced by those rendered as

humanitarian subjects, scholars and policymakers will fail to understand and challenge the structures of violence embedded within the humanitarian system. To that end, this thesis has traced the overlapping hauntings that shape Uganda's refugee regime: the ghostly remains of colonial land divisions and containment logics; the violence embedded in contemporary humanitarian governance; and the silences and symbolic erasures that structure daily life for refugees. Cumulative layers of historical injustice, structural neglect, and symbolic erasure demand that we stay with the discomfort and contradictions, taking these failings not as an endpoint, but as a starting point. This ethic calls for a politics that remains accountable to what persists in the silences and gaps of policy: to the unacknowledged losses, the deferred futures, and the lives structured by waiting, hunger, and abandonment. To live with the ghost is to acknowledge the unresolved histories that live on in the present, and to act as though another world is not only necessary, but already being whispered into being.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Data

I- denotes an interview. O- denotes an observation case. F- denotes a focus group discussion.

In the lists below, I have provided key details about each item of data. For the interviews this includes: core information about the participant, the date of the interview, the initials of the interviewer, the primary language spoken by the interviewee during the interview, and the location of the interview. In cases where translation assistance was provided during the interview, I have added these details after the initials of the interviewer, including the initials of the translator. For the focus groups I have also included the number of participants.

As outlined in the methods chapter, several of the research assistants I worked with during the course of the data collection are experienced researchers in their own right. Only three had had no previous experience of conducting in-depth qualitative research and even then, all had extensive experience working in community support roles. Their experience of handling complex and sensitive issues with care was particularly important for this research. Regardless of their research experience, each research assistant was provided with close guidance on the research ethics applicable to this research.

In cases where the interview was conducted independently by a research assistant, I provided an interview guide and worked closely with the research assistant, discussing the progress of the interviews and carefully reviewing the transcripts which were provided shortly after the interview. I followed up with the relevant research assistant in each case where clarification was needed. Sometimes this required an additional follow up phone call between the interviewer and the participant. In cases where an interview was conducted in a language other than English by one of the research assistants, a full English-language transcript of the interview was shared with me shortly after the interview.

In several cases, I conducted follow-up interviews, which provided an opportunity for follow-up questions and, in some cases, to track changes over time. When a participant was interviewed more than once I have separated out the responses by including an alphabetical notation after

the numerical figure assigned to each participant. The details of each interview are given in the corresponding line.

Abonga Francis (AF), Joseph Ajok (JA), Elijah Akom (EA), Osuta Jimmy (OJ), Siasa Consolate (SC), Thiik Machol (TM), Patricia Nyivuru (PN), Monday Ayikoru (MA), David Angualia (DA), Mariako Patrick (MP) and Charles Ogeno (CO) conducted semi-structured interviews, mobilised participants and assisted with translation as needed. Peter Biok (PB) provided occasional translation assistance.

While unusual for this type of research, it was necessary to work with a range of research assistants for this research in part because of practical reasons, including language barriers, location, and the networks of the research assistants themselves. AF, for example, conducted research in Gulu for the initial scoping stage of the research. Meanwhile, as noted below, MP and CO worked in Palabek. Closely related to the pragmatics of conducting research with marginalised, migrant populations is the ability of the interviewer to establish a relationship of trust with the participant. This also required that the participant felt comfortable with and trusted the translator (where relevant).

As outlined in the methods section, the early stages of the research were closely informed by scoping interviews to establish a baseline understanding of the research topic. This was particularly important as, at the time, there was minimal information available on the refugee populations living in Arua and Gulu. Where relevant, I conducted in-person follow-up interviews with some of these participants, relying on introductions provided by the relevant RAs.

A final note, Chapter 8 is supported by additional data for the Priorities for Prioritisation project. This project, led by PI Tim Allen, grew out of my PhD research and focused on the effects of prioritisation, drawing on primary data collected in Palabek and Rhino Camp Refugee Settlements and additional interviews conducted with humanitarian staff beyond the settlements. Tim Allen has kindly given me permission to draw on the resulting data in my thesis. This relates to four focus group discussions led by CO in Palabek. To provide further clarity on my role in the project, as well as conducting interviews with humanitarian staff, I guided the structuring of the data collection in both refuge settlements and developed the initial semi-structured interview

guides, working closely with the RAs, and I remained in close consultation with each RA throughout and provided feedback on the initial transcripts.

Interviews

1   Landlord, November 2022, DA, English, Arua

2   Landlord, November 2022, DA, English, Arua

3   Landlord, December 2022, DA, English, Arua

4   Landlord, December 2022, DA, English, Arua

5   Landlord, December 2022, DA, English, Arua

6   Landlord, December 2022, DA, English, Arua

7   Landlord, December 2022, DA, English, Arua

8   Landlord, December 2022, DA, English, Arua

9   Landlord, December 2022, DA, English, Arua

10   Landlord, January 2023, DA, English, Arua

11   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB with research assistance by TM, English, Arua.

12   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

13   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

14   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

15   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

16   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

17   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

18   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

19   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

20   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

21   Landlord, November 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

22   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

23   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

24   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

25   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

26   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

27   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

28   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

29   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

30   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

31   Landlord, December 2022, SC, OJ, Lugbara, Arua

32   Former women's representative RWCII, July 2022, CB, English, RCS

33   RWCIII, July 2022, CB, English, RCS

34   Former RWCII member, July 2022, CB, English, RCS

35   Headteacher, July 2022, CB, English, RCS

36   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation by TM, Dinka, Arua

37   English teacher and patron of the South Sudanese and West Nile Students Association, June 2022, CB, Gulu

38   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, English, Arua

39a   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

39b   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, OJ, CB, English, Arua

40a   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

40b   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, OJ, CB, English, Arua

41a   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

41b   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

42   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

43a   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

43b   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

44   South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua

45   South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua

46a   SSUSA Chairperson and South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

46b   SSUSA Chairperson and South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

47   South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua

48   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

49   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

50   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

51   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

52   South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua

53   South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua

54   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, OJ, English, Arua

55a   South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, PN, English, Arua.

55b   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, translation by TM, Juba Arabic, Arua.

55c   South Sudanese citizen, September 2022, CB, translation by TM, Juba Arabic, Arua.

56   Deputy Speaker for Gulu City, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

57   Ethiopian citizen, April 2022, AF, English, Gulu

58a   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation by TM, Dinka, Arua

58b	South Sudanese citizen, November 2022, CB, translation by TM, Dinka, Arua
59a	South Sudanese citizen, September 2022, CB, translation by TM, Juba Arabic, Arua
59b	South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation by TM, Juba Arabic, Arua
60	South Sudanese citizen, November 2022, TM, Dinka, Arua.
61	South Sudanese citizen, January 2023, TM, Dinka, Arua.
62	South Sudanese citizen, December 2022, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
63a	South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Nuer, Arua
63b	South Sudanese citizen, December 2022, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
64	South Sudanese citizen, November 2022, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
65	South Sudanese citizen, November 2022, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
66	South Sudanese citizen, December 2022, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
67a	South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation by JA, Nuer, Arua
67b	South Sudanese citizen, December 2022, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
68	South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, PN, English, Arua
69	South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, PN, English, Arua
70	South Sudanese citizen, January 2023, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
71	South Sudanese citizen, January 2023, TM translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
72a	South Sudanese citizen, March 2022, PN, English, Arua
72b	South Sudanese citizen, August 2022, CB, English, Arua
73	South Sudanese citizen, September 2022, CB, English, Arua
74	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
75	Pastor, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
76	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua

77	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
78	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
79	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
80	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
81	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
82	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, OJ, English, Arua
83	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, PN, English, Arua
84	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, PN, English, Arua
85	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, PN, English, Arua
86	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, PN, English, Arua
87	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, PN, English, Arua
88	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, FA, English, Gulu
89	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, FA, English, Gulu
90	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, FA, English, Gulu
91	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, FA, English, Gulu
92	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, FA, English, Gulu
93a	South Sudanese citizen, April 2022, FA, English, Gulu
93b	South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu
94	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, FA, English, Gulu
95	Landlord, October 2022, CB, English, Arua
96	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, PN, English, Arua
97	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, FA, English, Gulu
98	Detective, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

99	Community Development Officer, July 2022, CB, Arua
100	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, FA, English, Gulu
101	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, FA, English, Gulu
102	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, FA, English, Gulu
103	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, FA, English, Gulu
104	Broker, January 2023, TM, English, Arua
105	Broker, January 2023, TM, English, Arua
106	South Sudanese citizen, January 2023, TM, Juba Arabic, Arua
107	South Sudanese citizen, December 2022, TM, Dinka, RCS
108	South Sudanese Citizen, December 2022, TM, translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
109	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, PN, English, Arua
110	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, PN, Acholi, Arua
111	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, PN, English, Arua
112	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, PN, English, Arua
113	South Sudanese citizen, May 2022, PN, English, Arua
114	South Sudanese Citizen, December 2022, TM, translation assistance by PB, Nuer, Arua
115	Bishop, South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, English, Arua
116	Deputy camp commandant, October 2022, CB, English, Arua
117	City Health and Sanitation officer, August 2022, CB, English, Arua
118	RWC member, South Sudanese citizen, August 2022, CB, English, RCS
119	LCI, September 2022, CB, English, Arua
120	Former Mayor, September 2022, CB, English, Arua
121	City IT officer, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

122   LCI, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

123   INGO staff, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

124   LCI, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

125   South Sudanese citizen, August 2022, CB, English, Arua

126   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

127   South Sudanese citizen, August 2022, CB, English, RCS

128   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

129   IRC Staff, May 2022, CB, English, Kampala

130   City HR officer, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

131   South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, English, Arua

132   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

133a   South Sudanese citizen, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

133b   South Sudanese citizen, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

134   Retired government officer, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

135   South Sudanese citizen, March 2023, CB, English, RCS

136   South Sudanese citizen and RWCIII member, July 2022, CB, English, RCS

137   WFP Uganda national level staff, June 2023, CB, English, Remote

138   VNG International staff, April 2023, CB, English, Remote

139   WFP Uganda national level staff, May 2024, CB, English, Remote

140   Human rights lawyer, June 2023, CB, English, Remote

141   UNHCR livelihoods officer, July 2024, CB, English, Arua

142   Famine Early Warnings System staff, August 2024, CB, English, Remote

143   Sub-regional WFP staff, June 2024, CB, English, Arua

144   Logistics Officer, OPM, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

145   RWCI committee member and South Sudanese citizen, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

146   South Sudanese citizen, April 2023, CB, English, RCS

147   City HR officer, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

148a   City planner, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

148b   City planner, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

149   South Sudanese Pastor, August 2022, CB, English, Arua

150   SSURA chairperson and South Sudanese citizen, August 2022, CB, English, Arua

151   VHT and South Sudanese citizen, March 2023, CB, English, RCS

152   Professor at Muni University, April 2024, CB, English, Arua

153   Former AVSI West Nile staff, August 2022, CB, English, Kampala

154   Impact Initiatives Research Officer, March 2024, CB, English, Kampala

155a   UNHCR Uganda sub-regional health officer, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

155b   UNHCR Uganda sub-regional health officer, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

156   Regional Desk Officer, OPM, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

157   Sub-regional programme officer UNHCR Uganda, June 2022, CB, English, Arua

158   South Sudanese citizen, December 2023, TM, Dinka, RCS

159   NRC paralegal, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

160   South Sudanese citizen, March 2024, TM, Dinka, RCS

161   UNHCR Uganda national-level staff, March 2023, CB, English, Kampala

162   Uganda Refugee and Disaster Management Council staff, March 2024, CB, English, RCS

163   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, RCS

164   City education officer, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

165   Teacher, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

166   Former mayor of Arua town, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

167   Danish Refugee Council staff, September 2022, English, Arua

168   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, Arua

169   WFP Uganda staff member, June 2023, CB, English, Remote

170   Secondary school teacher, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

171   Staff member RICE West Nile, August 2022, CB, English, Arua

172   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

173   Rhino Camp Town Council member, December 2024, CB, English, Arua

174   South Sudanese citizen, February 2024, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, RCS

175   South Sudanese citizen, RWCII Chairperson, August 2022, CB, English, RCS

176   UNHCR staff member, March 2022, CB, English, Arua

177   City health officer, September 2022, CB, English, Arua

178   UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub staff, October 2024, CB, English, Remote

179   Cities Alliance, February 2024, CB, English, Remote

180   UNHCR staff, May 2022, February 2025, CB, English, Kampala, Remote

181   South Sudanese citizen, September 2022, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, Arua

182   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, South Sudanese citizen, RCS

183   South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Dinka, Arua

184   South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Dinka, Arua

185   South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Dinka, Arua

186   South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Dinka, Arua

187   South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Dinka, Arua

188   South Sudanese citizen, June 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Dinka, Arua

189   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Juba Arabic, Arua

190   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Juba Arabic, Arua

191   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Juba Arabic, Arua

192   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Juba Arabic, Arua

193   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Juba Arabic, Arua

194   South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, translation assistance by JA, Nuer, Arua

195   District land officer, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

196   Lugbara Kari member, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

197   Former MP, August 2022, CB, English, Kampala

198   Internal security officer, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

199   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, Arua

200   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, Arua

201   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, Arua

202   Doctor at Oli Health Centre IV, October 2022, CB, English, Arua

203   Regional NRC staff, August 2022, CB, English, Kampala

204   SSURA programme officer, South Sudanese citizen, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

205   Sub-regional UNHCR staff, July 2022, CB, English, Arua

206   Water Engineer, Malteser, September 2022, CB, English, RCS

207   Reception centre staff, August 2022, CB, English, Imvepi Settlement

208   NRC staff, March 2023, CB, English, Arua

209   South Sudanese citizen, October 2022, CB, translation assistance by TM, Dinka, Arua

210   IRC headquarters staff, May 2022, CB, English, Kampala

211   City records officer, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

212   Cashier at Dahab Shili, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

213   LC1, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

214   LC1, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

215   LC1, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

216   City community development officer, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

217   AVSI headquarters staff, June 2022, CB, English, Remote

218   Teacher, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

219   Student, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

220   Student, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

221   Student, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

222   Student, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

223   Student, June 2022, CB, English, Gulu

Cases

1   Imvepi Maternal Death Audit, August 2022, Imvepi Refugee Settlement

2   GFA Tika, October 2022, Tika Zone, RCS

3   Household visits with NRC staff, September 2022, Arua City

4   Court dates for prospective trial concerning the September 2020 attack, July 2022, OPM offices and Arua High Court, Arua City.

5   NRC stakeholder meeting, October 2022, Golden Courts Hotel, Arua City

6   Household visits, Tika, July 2022, Tika Zone, RCS.

7   Household prayer event to welcome a family member to Arua, April 2023, Arua City

8   Verification exercise, September 2022, Ofua Zone, RCS

9   UNHCR Livelihoods meeting, July 2023, UNHCR offices, Arua

10   UNHCR Office, March 2023, Kampala

11   Visit to Tika Zone after the court session failed, July 2022, Tika Zone, RCS

12   Landlord-tenant disagreements, March 2024, Arua City

13   South Sudanese Ambassador to Uganda visits Arua, July 2023, Le Confidential Hotel

14   European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations presentation, October 2024, Remote

15   Cities Alliance Interregional Dialogue, Final workshop for the CRRF: Inclusive Urban Development and Mobility, June 2023, Koboko Municipality

16   GFA distribution Tika, March 2023, Tika Zone, RCS

17   Church service, June 2022, Ociba, Arua City

18   Youth Centre Enyau Road, September 2022, Arua City

19   Muru Church ICLA mobilisation event by NRC, September 2022, Anyafyo, Arua City

20   Visiting a family from Arua in Juba, October 2022, Custom Corner, Juba

21   Water sites visit, October 2022, RCS

22   NRC ICLA session in Greenland Primary School, November 2022, Oli, Arua City

23   SSURA women's meeting, July 2022, Anyafyo, Arua City

24   Independence Day Celebrations, July 2023, Mvara

25   Post-court discussion between OPM, DRC and witnesses, July 2022, OPM office, Arua City

26   GFA Tika, August 2022, Tika Zone, RCS

27   SSURA convening City Development Forum meeting for refugee representation, February 2024, Arua City

Focus Group Discussions

1   South Sudanese community leaders, July 2022, 5 participants, location: Ociba church hall, languages: Dinka, Juba Arabic, English, translation assistance by JA, led by CB

2   Tika 4, after informal trial suspension, July 2022, 7 participants, location: RCS, language: Dinka, translation assistance by JA, led by CB

3   Tika Zone FDP, October 2022, 3 participants, location: RCS, language: English, led by CB

4   Zone 1, Block 2, December 2023, 6 participants, location: Palabek Refugee Settlement, language: Acholi, led by CO

5   Zone 2, Block 2, December 2023, 6 participants, location: Palabek Refugee Settlement, language: Acholi, led by CO

6   Zone 1, Block 4, December 2023, 7 participants, location: Palabek Refugee Settlement, language: Acholi, led by CO

7   Zone 4, Block 4, December 2023, 6 participants, location: Palabek Refugee Settlement, language: Acholi, led by CO

Appendix B – Phase III

18th January 2023

RE: PRIORITIZATION OF GENERAL FOOD & CASH ASSISTANCE (GFA) TO REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN UGANDA

Due to the declining funding situation over the past three years, OPM, WFP, and UNHCR continue to seek measures to maximise resources and protect the most vulnerable in the provision of General Food and Cash Assistance to refugees in Uganda. The ration cuts introduced in April 2020, February 2021 and most recently in December 2022 have led to an increased essential needs gap among the most vulnerable refugee population, as rations were largely reduced uniformly (i.e. same reductions for all refugees), regardless of vulnerability levels of individual households.

In 2023, within the constraints of available resources, WFP will implement a progressive shift to needs-based targeting of all relief food and cash assistance to refugees in Uganda, following an endorsement of the approach at the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) Steering Group meeting held on 13 December 2022. The new model is a result of extensive consultations between WFP, UNHCR and OPM and will draw extensively on the data from UNHCR's 2022 Individual Profiling Exercise in defining refugee vulnerability.

The prioritisation exercise will ensure that the most vulnerable refugees and new arrivals receive the highest food ration possible based on available resources, while transitioning the least vulnerable, self-reliant households, out of monthly humanitarian food assistance. The exact levels of food and cash assistance rations for the most vulnerable and moderately vulnerable households will be communicated to and discussed with all stakeholders before implementation roll-out and communication with communities before March 2023. The approach establishes three categories of vulnerability as stated below:

- **Most vulnerable:** refugees would receive the highest ration possible.
- **Moderately vulnerable:** refugees would receive a reduced ration, and possible livelihood support
- **Least vulnerable:** and self-reliant refugees would be transitioned out of relief assistance

By eliminating food assistance rations for the least vulnerable community members, resource prioritisation shall enable WFP to free up resources for a larger ration for the most vulnerable. While the most vulnerable households will receive the highest ration feasible, WFP will continue to provide assistance to moderately vulnerable families at reduced rations. At the heart of this shift is the need to focus on resilience and livelihood-strengthening activities that support a broader transition to self-reliance in refugee settlements. Thus, WFP, UNHCR and OPM will continue coordinating with partners and the livelihood sector to advocate for widening and more comprehensive livelihood support and funding.

Broad community consultations begun towards the end of 2022. From January 2023, our priority will be to deepen consultation with key stakeholders, including refugees and non-governmental organisations working in refugee settlements. **The first step will be to identify those least vulnerable households who have achieved self-reliance and transition them out of relief food and cash assistance.**

The following criteria shall be used to identify the least vulnerable refugee households:

- Self-targeting/Self-Identification. This is an opportunity for the refugees to voluntarily exit from WFP General Food/Cash Assistance and ifree up limited resources for those in most need.
- Households with acceptable food consumption and not adopting crisis or emergency (negative) coping strategies, in addition to:
  - Households not collecting GFA ration three consecutive times
  - Households with a member as a salaried employee
  - Households that have business as their main source of income
  - Households that own valuable assets
  - Households that receive significant assistance for self-reliance

We are planning to identify the first cohort of the least vulnerable by the end of **February 2023**.

As a close follow-up step, WFP, UNHCR and OPM will identify the most vulnerable households based on an index of protection and demographic indicators to receive the highest ration possible.

If Refugee households believe they have been erroneously categorised, they can appeal the decision through a formal and transparent appeals mechanism to be jointly managed by WFP, UNHCR and OPM where an individual is not satisfied with the decision.The joint appeals process would be communicated before implementation.

To prepare refugees for Phase 3 of prioritising food assistance in all settlements, another information campaign will be carried out in the coming weeks using the attached key messages. WFP, UNHCR and OPM will closely work with all relevant stakeholders at the regional and settlement level.

The purpose of this communication therefore, is to notify of the proposed prioritisation approach and request you to form a joint (OPM, UNHCR & WFP) task force to ensure that correct and comprehensive communication is passed on at all different levels of your organisations, refugee leaders and partners as we respond to this dire resource shortfall in a harmonised approach, mitigating potential risks that may arise along the way.

Abdirahman Meygag
Country Representative
WFP Uganda

Keith Muhakanizi
Permanent Secretary
Office of the Prime Minister
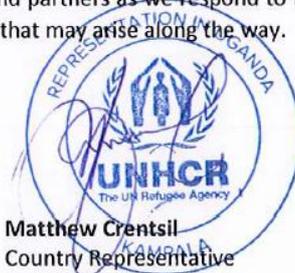
Matthew Crentsil
Country Representative
UNHCR Uganda

CC: Hon. Hilary Onek, Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees
CC: Hon. Raphael Magyezi, Minister of Local Government
CC: Hon. Esther Davinia Anyakuni Minister of State for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees
CC: Mr. Douglas Asiimwe, Acting Commissioner for Refugees, Office of the Prime Minister
CC: Ms. Helen Bugaari, Director, CRRF Secretariat, Office of the Prime Minister
CC: Ms. Susan Ngongi Namondo, UN Resident Coordinator

NEEDS-BASED PRIORITIZATION PHASE III – KEY MESSAGES TO SHARE WITH REFUGEE STAKEHOLDERS – January 19, 2023

- The implementation of a needs-based prioritization of all general food assistance to refugees in Uganda follows an endorsement of the approach at the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) Steering Group on 13 December 2022.

- We understand that many refugees continue to rely on humanitarian assistance. But we also know that

  o Different refugee households have different needs and capacities.

  o Some refugee households are less able to meet their food needs than other households.

  o There is and will continue to be limited donor funding for General Food and Cash Assistance to Refugees.

- The prioritisation exercise will ensure the most vulnerable refugees – including new arrivals – receive the highest food/cash assistance ration possible while removing the least vulnerable, self-reliant households in each settlement from monthly relief cash or food assistance completely.

- • At the centre of this shift is a focus on resilience and livelihood activities to support a broader transition to self-reliance in refugee settlements. We, however, know that the livelihood sector is underfunded and will require increased funding for the prioritisation to succeed fully.

- Therefore, in the first quarter of 2023, refugee households in all 13 refugee settlements in Uganda will be divided into 3 categories with different levels of food/cash assistance households based on households' needs and considering the very limited donor funding available for food/cash assistance.

  a. **Least Vulnerable households** that are self-reliant and can cover their food needs without receiving WFP's food/cash assistance will stop receiving this assistance.

  b. **Moderately vulnerable households** will receive a reduced ration; with the vision that they are transitioned to livelihood and self-reliance programmes led by different development actors

  c. **Most vulnerable households** will receive the highest food/cash ration possible based on donor funding.

- The prioritisation exercise will **NOT change the refugee status granted by OPM and UNHCR.**

- **WFP, UNHCR and OPM are committed to consulting you** to collect your feedback on the needs and vulnerabilities of different refugee households in the settlement. **The information you provide and the data from the individual profiling exercise (IPE) will be used to ensure we target better assistance according to need.**

- **A confidential appeal mechanism process will be available in each settlement.** If Refugee households believe they have been erroneously categorised for cash/food ration, they can appeal the decision through a formal confidential appeals mechanism process. The appeals process will be reviewed and improved in 2023.

- This approach is the result of extensive collaboration between WFP, UNHCR and OPM will draw extensively on the data from UNHCR's 2022 Individual Profiling Exercise in defining refugee vulnerability.

Appendix C – Additional Figure

Figure 23 - Inscription on the memorial stone. Source: Brown, 2022.