'Almost a City": Understanding and Planning for Refugee Movement to the City Informed

By The Context of Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract

Mainstreamed ideas of refugee camps as pathways for refugee solutions create blind spots in addressing urban refugee issues. Using reports and existing knowledge of refugee experiences in camps and the city of Nairobi, Kenya, this paper provides a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the propensity for refugees to move towards the city and the effects of this migration pattern. Shifting notions of refugees from passive subjects to active participants is important in reframing refugees as having human agency. This paradigm shift aids in analyzing the dialectic between refugees as agents and the systemic structures in refugee camps and the city. Examination of this dialectic leads to a proposal to support localized development-based strategies created by refugee grassroot initiatives to promote refugee self-sufficiency, resiliency, and independence from humanitarian aid supporting the integration of refugees wholly into urban life and spaces.

Introduction

Colloquial concepts of refugee occupied spaces have often been aligned with images of enclosed camps or settlements. This may be true for the larger context of refugee movements; however, evident camp-to-city migration patterns have developed through time. Urban refuge is a strategy pursued by refugees and displaced persons as a solution to their forced migration.

This research will focus on a combined descriptive-prescriptive analysis of urban refuge and its impacts upon Nairobi, Kenya's urbanity. By doing so, three main research objectives became evident. First, to understand the propensity for refugees to move towards the city. Second, to examine the extent to which refugee settlement affect the Nairobian politics, economy, spatiality and social fabric. Finally, to discuss the extent to which strategies are or can be implemented in Nairobi to improve urban refugee experiences. These research objectives establish the lived experiences of refugees pre- and post-urban refuge to better distinguish appropriate contextualized strategies to improve or solve issues of urban refuge.

Construction of the Refugee Individual

To fully grasp the concept that each phenomenon is contextual, we must define the "refugee" within the context of Kenya and displacement. Kenya aligns with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) definition of a refugee based on the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It characterizes refugees as the following:

> [Individuals] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to

such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to

the Status of Refugees, 1951, Article 1, Section 2)

However, this definition does not account for economic and environmental migrants which is a topic of contention in contemporary literature.

Furthermore, as refugees are inherently political actors, they can also be seen as *Homo sacer*— a biopolitical actor functioning within the social structures of a space (Diken, 2004). These actors live a life of constant exception and distinction by and from citizens which is exemplified by their exclusion from the "domain of ethical responsibility" and exposure to "violence both from civil society and the state without legal consequences" (Diken, 2004, p. 88). It is then argued that refugees are perpetually in a state of ambivalence, of the in-between, where they are constantly reminded of their outside existence while maintaining and being reminded of their occupation of space within a state.

As an acknowledgement, this research attempts to withdraw from the habitual practice of placing the "refugee" in the "victim" role shifting away from the vulnerable narrative they are perpetuated in. Rather, it is necessary to view them as agents or participants within a space who interact with the social complexities they directly and indirectly influence. In doing so, they can be seen as individuals who are influenced by social structures, human agency, or by both simultaneously.

Propensity to Move Towards the City

Factors that affect refugee migration toward the city can be divided into push and pull factors. Push factors characterize ways in which camp lifestyles as well as internal and external governance influence outward force away from camps and settlements. Meanwhile, pull factors explain ways in which urban ways of life produce inward forces toward cities.

Push Factors

The anxieties of host nations concerning refugees, and migration as a whole process, are often manifested through their practices and policies. Kibreab's (2007) research in Sudan that outline criterions as to "why government prefer spatially segregated settlements" (p. 27) away from urban areas is recontextualized to the Kenyan context. In doing so, the most evident criterion seen in the Kenyan context is the "prevention of integration of refugees into host societies" (Kibreab, 2007, p. 29). For example, refugee integration in Kenya is blocked by credentialization methods that discount refugees of "existing skills, capacities, and qualifications" (Joyce, 2020, p. 6) that they may have prior to displacement. This practice has created immobilizing effects upon refugee communities residing in camps. The limitation of movement and confinement approaches are often enforced through institutional actors and humanitarian formal structures. For example, police roadblocks enforced on roads to and from camps are prevalent in extortive practices by officers often acting upon a refugee's "failure to produce proper documentation" to procure bribes (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019, p. 2299). Consequentially, the financial burden of paying bribes is then a reason for immobility especially when legal and formal livelihood opportunities are lacking or non-existent, and the camp's informal economy is highly competitive.

Moreover, aid provisions are structured based on the spatial confinements of camps where surveillance is naturalized, and activities are controlled. This is exemplified in the observed "repressive manners" camps have exuded through social contracts that diminish or completely take away refugee's autonomy, most of whom have no alternate solution to their displacement, in exchange for international assistance (Chkam, 2015, p. 80).

Additionally, internal camp power dynamics has created biased systems that is formally untraversable by refugees unless they are comparatively advantaged. For example, educated and

informal camp leaders and representatives are seen to have greater access to rations and services provided through the formal sector most of whom function in their own self-interests (Ager et al., 1995, p. 283). These power dynamics and self-interests have also produced conflicts leading to insecurity producing incidences of "frequent outbreaks of violence" in camps as well as conflicts between local and refugee populations (Kirui and Mwaruvie, 2012, p.164).

Pull Factors

The promise of the city often entails ideas of abundancy whether it be in terms of employment, security, services, or social diversity. In relatively current literature, "livelihood opportunities and greater security" are the two main reasons declared by urban refugees as to why they have decided to settle in Nairobi (Crisp et al., 2012, S24). For example, anonymity is used as a defense strategy in order to virtually erase individuals fleeing from the enforcement of immigration policies by the government (Newhouse, 2015, p. 2298).

Furthermore, there are patterns from which refugee migration influxes in Nairobi can be described using the concept of a "bright-hope thesis" (Xu, 2022, p. 24) derived from Harris and Todaro's (1970) economic model which explains rural to urban migration. Harris and Todaro (1970) argues that acts of migration from rural to urban despite high unemployment in the city is "an economic rational choice on the part of the individual migrant" (p. 127). In the refugee context, it reiterates the earlier argument that refugees are individuals that act upon their own agency, and in this instance, not only are they politically active but they are also economically charged. This is exemplified by their willingness to sacrifice material aid provisions and legal security in camps to explore what is thought to be greater opportunities in the city; these greater opportunities include higher "expected earnings" (Harris and Todaro, 1970, p. 126) and better provision of services concerning health and education both of which are comparable to camp experiences.

Concerning educational systems in the Kakuma refugee camp, students commented that a significant difference between camp and non-camp educational systems is rooted in the larger proportion of accredited and "professional" teachers in the latter (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019, p.232). Additionally, the volunteering nature of camp educational systems provides "lower instructor accountability" in terms of providing children proper and adequate education, whereas teachers are accountable based on a transactional relationship between educators and parents in urban areas where parents pay the fees to purchase the services provided by educators (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019, p.232).

Another reason that makes a city attractive is its similarity to camps. I propose the concept of an "almost a city" which argues that the mimicry of city qualities by camps foster ease of integration because it minimizes differences between camp- and city-living[1]. I will be using the Dadaab and Kakuma camps in order to explain this theory. Both camps evoke city-like characteristics such as a market economy, which is made of small entrepreneurs and "petty activities," that has "consequently developed a trading network" (De Montclos and Kagwanja, 2000, p. 214). Another example is the camps observed experiences of "hybrid socialization" that creates intersecting socialization strategies between ethnicities, clans, and the humanitarian organizations who embody the global sphere (Agier, 2002, p. 336). These examples are hindered, however, by ideas of legality and citizenship that cannot be fully attained but can be mitigated by city-living. Echoing the idea of "fictive identities" by Agier (2002), it is argued that the city's capacity to receive migrants virtually unnoticed provides an advantageous setting for refugees to create new and fictitious identities. For example, children have developed strategies to resist

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[1] It is important to note that this concept assumes that the refugee experience is homogenous. While I do believe in the diverse and heterogenous refugee experience, "almost a city" as a preliminary theory is established as a prompt to consider notions of citizenship and legality as hinderance to refugee integration.

xenophobia by concealing their refugee status and "acting like Kenyans to avoid stigma and discrimination" (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019, p. 227). Hence, it is argued that by discarding their refugee status—which is symbolic of their non-citizenry—in favour of one that is more useful in city-living, reconstructing their identities is an adaptation produced by urban refuge.

Effects of Refugees on Nairobian Economy, Politics, Spatiality and Social Fabric

Informal Economy

Similar to camp economic activities, the use of the informal economy is prevalent in urban refuge. It is the main source of economic participation urban refugees can act upon. This choice can be explained by exploring ways in which refugee enter host countries.

Most refugees' entry and asylum in Kenya are based on international human rights policies of "non-refoulment" with most of the Nairobi urban refugees consisting of *prima facie* refugees who gain entrance based on apparent circumstances occurring in their origin countries which have generated well-founded fear (Campbell, 2006, p. 400). However, material assistance and legal protection can only be provided through the formal sector, which is comprised of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) along with UNHCR, in settlement or camp settings. Therefore, the choice to live in the city, specifically Nairobi, by refugees is a sacrifice of the access to "legal protection or material assistance" that the formal sector in the camps provide (Campbell, 2006, p. 399). As a result, it is argued that the illegal occupation of space in cities by urban refugees hinder their opportunities of participating in the legal and formal economy to generate income. Therefore, their participation in the informal economy can be described as a survival mechanism which is practiced through "small scale trade, remittance dependency, and casual labour" (Campbell, 2006, p. 399). It is also argued that the dependency upon the informal economy is

necessary to an urban refugee's survival because their income generating capacities are limited by the parameters of legality and formality.

Navigating Corruption

There are evident gaps between policy and enforcement or practice in Kenya with concern to refugees residing in non-camp environments. Urban residence by refugees is seen as a direct undermining of the government and formal powers within the legal framework. However, in practice, it is depicted differently. State or institutional actors such as police officers, for example, embody the enforcement of policies and "regulate the movement of refugees" and their existence in urban spaces within the Kenyan legal dimension (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019, p. 2299). Certain degrees of tolerance are shown to urban refugees by Kenyan officials; however, it is observed that the interaction between the "illegal" urban refugees and police officers have yielded in the reproduction of corruption (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019, p. 2298). Refugees mitigate this threat through bribery. As a result, this practice has since generated a lucrative side-business for police officers preying upon the "legal vulnerability of refugees" (Bellino and Dryden-Peterson, 2019, p. 2299). Consequently, bribery is one of the main expense urban refugees' experiences, and corruption and surveillance are entities they must become accustomed to (Crisp et al., 2012, S31)

Proliferation of Slums and Residence among Locals

A camp's core objective is to provide a space where necessities, such as residence, can be provided to refugees through formal structures; residing in urban spaces inherently supports the secession of spatial organizations that foster such activities. Furthermore, migrant-generating factors such as the "bright hope thesis" are often confused to be definite assurances of high city wages and better access to services (Xu, 2022, p. 24; Harris and Todaro, 1970). Therefore, refugee-

occupied spaces are often limited to the peripheral slums and "land inappropriate for normal residential development," such as waste sites or along transportation infrastructures, most of which are also occupied by pre-existing local urban poor (Crisp et al., 2012, S31). The interaction between the two communities often lead to social patterns that make up the ecology of the slums.

Xenophobia and discriminatory attitudes have often been naturalized as a reaction to migration and the occupation of space by at least one party that exude a difference. Interestingly and unsurprisingly, tensions that arise between refugees in Nairobi and urban locals are beyond the basis of race and ethnicity. For example, Somali refugees often confront xenophobic attitudes from the long establish Somali-Kenyan communities who does not directly facilitate the resettlement of Somali refugees in urban space (Beversluis et al., 2016, p. 114-115). This divide is argued to derive from notions or ideas of citizenship founded, in this instance, by temporal differences of occupation and sense of identity.

Possible Solutions

In order to mitigate issues that arise from urban refuge, integration — one of UNHCR's durable solutions — must be enforced as a viable solution to refugee issues of identity and citizenship. An evident success of this is the community of Eastleigh, Nairobi that was transformed from residential housing to a commercial space by the occupation and management of Somali refugees in the 1990s; it's entrenchment in the informal economy nurture a space that provide employment opportunities for refugees (Campbell, 2006, p. 402-403). This example argues against and challenge notions of refugees as economic burdens to states. It reconceptualizes refugees as individuals who can integrate themselves without the structures offered by the formal sector such as humanitarian programmes and material assistance. However, it is important to emphasize the heterogeneity of the refugee population. Eastleigh's economic emergence is due to the class status

of the Somali refugees that initially began the commercialization of the space most of whom are wealthy and have "entrepreneurial experience and capital" (Campbell, 2006, p. 404). Hence, we must be mindful of integrative approaches that consider the intersectional experiences of urban refugees.

Additionally, to support integration policies, the Kenyan government and formal structures, such as international organizations, must support localized development-based strategies created through refugee grassroot initiatives with the goal of developing refugee self-sufficiency, resilience, and, eventually, independency from humanitarian aid. To fulfill this, developmental approaches must formally and legally acknowledge refugees' existence within urban spaces that goes beyond state acts of law enforcement and enumeration. Formalization strategies of the informal economy, for example, are employed through the incorporation of large-scale commercial enterprises in Eastleigh, Nairobi (Campbell, 2006, p. 408). As a novel idea, inclusive developmental approaches will seek to improve the well-being of urban refugees and advocate for their freedom of movement and right to employment.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided a descriptive analysis of urban refuge in Nairobi, Kenya culminating to a proposed prescription to the urban effects camp-to-urban migration entails. First, I established the construction of the refugee individual. In doing so, I defined refugees beyond the grounds of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention by describing their existence as a *Homo sacer* — a biopolitical actor and acknowledging their role as participants and agents who engage with the social complexities they are confronted with. Justification for refugees' inclination to move toward the city are bifurcated into two factors; 1) push factors that describe refugee experience while residing in camps as well as their interaction with the externalities that surround them; 2) pull

factors describe forces that attract camp to urban migration such as the "bright hope thesis" and "almost a city" argument. Moreover, I have outlined the effects of urban refuge within the context of Nairobi's economy, polity, spatiality, and social fabric. Finally, I proposed integration supported by localized development strategies based on refugee grassroot initiatives as a viable solution to urban refugee issues. Tackling urban refuge, or rather, refugee issues as a larger construct necessitate changes in policies, narratives, and rhetoric. Recognizing refugees as active participants who has autonomy, agency, and political will is already a step towards that goal.

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