Why Uganda?[1]

All governments have laws that seek to govern their borders and specifically to determine who can enter the country. Borders are meant to exclude and keep certain people (non-citizens) out of the country. However, immigration control policies and borders are tested when there is a case of mass displacement with hundreds of thousands of people seeking asylum that the government cannot turn away as stipulated by international law and conventions.[2]The test to borders and immigration policies has been evident in Uganda since the country started taking in refugees pre-independence from the British.

Uganda is a presidential republic that exhibits features of authoritarianism (Tripp, 2004; Svolik, 2012; Kagoro, 2016). The country has had the same leader since 1986 with governmental positions being rotated among few individuals. Like many authoritarian states, the Ugandan government pays little attention to public opinion and in most cases makes decisions without the consent of its citizens. But although the Ugandan government does not heed to the opinions of its citizens, the government pays attention to its image in the international arena especially in relation to its refugee policies.

Uganda has been lauded for its open door policies towards refugees to the extent that it is recognized as one of the most hospitable countries in the world for refugees.[3]This reputation as a hospitable refugee hosting country is important for the government in laundering its image to the international audience who can then afford to ignore other human rights violations in the country for the façade of immigration hospitality at a time when there is rising anti-immigration rhetoric[4].

---

[1] This discussion of forced displacement excludes internally displaced persons

[2] Article 14 Universal Declaration of Human Rights grants the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution; 1951 Refugee Convention expounds on these rights and delineates obligations of refugee hosting countries

[3] A simple Google search on Uganda's refugee policy will result into multiple media pieces praising the country for its hospitable immigration policies.

[4] This rise in anti-immigration policies is linked to the rise in right-wing fascism

The international refugee regime influences host governments for both practical and normative reasons. Practically, international assistance increases a country's ability to accept refugees by providing financial assistance, stimulating domestic markets and creating infrastructure for example the development of "new towns" or the improved delivery of services like water and medical care in areas where refugees settle[5]. Donor countries encourage favorable treatment of refugees by promising or threatening to withhold bilateral aid or "earmarked" contributions to refugee aid. The provision of assistance (and the threat of reducing it) means UNHCR carries some influence with the host government[6].

Due to the aid, reputation laundering and the expected economic benefits, Uganda is believed to gain from receiving refugees than not receiving them. A small country like Uganda that depends on aid from foreign governments is then strong-armed into hosting large numbers of refugees as rich countries increasingly implement restrictive and exclusionary migration policies.

However, it is not always that efforts and interests of rich donor countries through international organizations gets translated into policy action or change in government behavior. One reason for this is the idea of sovereignty. A sudden influx of refugees challenges the notion that borders can be controlled especially for a country like Uganda where borders are porous. Sudden migration events like a refugee crisis due to conflict in a neighboring country undermines the government's ability to determine who enters its territory. In cases like this, governments must

---

https://www.dw.com/en/anti-immigrant-attitudes-rise-worldwide-poll/a-55024481

[5] Kreibaum, Merle. "Their suffering, our burden? How Congolese refugees affect the Ugandan population." *World Development* 78 (2016): 262-287.

[6] Jacobsen, Karen. "Factors influencing the policy responses of host governments to mass refugee influxes." *International migration review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 655-678.

compromise their preferred policy directions to accommodate recommendations by international actors to incorporate long-term refugee assistance into national development programs[7].

Balancing the idea of sovereignty with adherence to global norms, international laws and conventions can be a tricky business. This balancing act can be viewed as pressure from international actors and inherently translated as a threat to sovereignty. Pressure from international actors on countries in the Global South can also be interpreted as an imperialistic and neocolonial attempt to control the politics of formerly colonized countries.[8] The maintenance of sovereignty is the fundamental objective of all nation states. Once that sovereignty is threatened in any way, countries take defensive measures to maintain it. One of the ways that countries maintain sovereignty is by exercising control over who enters or leaves their territory. If countries are pressured by international organizations and other governments to open their borders to refugees, they lose control of their borders. This means that pressure from international organizations and foreign governments can cause the opposite reaction where countries seeking to exercise more control over their borders make restrictive border control policies that limits the number of refugees they admit.

Since the treatment of refugees is closely monitored by organizations such as the UNHCR that have the ability to not only pressure but also name and shame countries that do not provide fair treatment to refugees, a country like Uganda is forced to keep a welcoming attitude towards refugees. For these reasons, the Ugandan government has kept an open-door policy for refugees especially those coming from neighboring states.

How Uganda deals with its refugee problem

---

[7] Jacobsen (1996)
[8] Jacobsen (1996).

Three solutions are often touted as solutions to Uganda's refugee hosting. Uganda is the number 1 refugee hosting country in Africa with a population of over1,500,000 refugees coming from countries such as South Sudan, DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, and Ethiopia[9]. Hosting of refugees comes with certain responsibilities for the government. "The specific and narrow definition" of who a refugee is seeks to define the relation of a certain category of foreigners with the state. One's refugee status obligates the host government to provide protection to the individual and avail them with certain social services. Refugee status then delineates the relationship that one has with the state and how the state views the individual[10]. However, the government often fails to meet its obligation towards refugees due to the limited availability of resources. Therefore, how can the government solve its "refugee problem?" Three solutions are often touted as solutions to Uganda's refugee hosting, and these are: Integration, Repatriation, and resettlement.

Temporary Guests or Here to Stay? A case for Integration

Refugees in Africa are often viewed as temporary guests who are in the host communities to escape the immediate effects of a crisis in their origin countries. However, evidence shows that refugees are not temporary fixture in African societies especially in places that have experienced multiple waves of civil conflict. For Uganda, a country that has been host to refugees since before its independence, one would think that the country would implement better integration strategies for its not so temporary guests.

Integration of refugees into their host community is the concerted efforts to help "refugees adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity."[11] Efforts to help

---

9 UNHCR
https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga
10 Nabuguzi, Emmanuel. "Refugees and politics in Uganda." (1993).

11 UNHCR Integration of Refugees: A discussion paper
https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2018/02/integration_discussion_paper_July_2014_EN.pdf

refugees adapt include providing a welcoming environment and meeting the needs of those refugees through the provision of various social services (UNHCR). In Uganda, integration of refugees includes placing refugees in settlements that are part of the host communities. Refugees have freedom of movement and can freely interact with their hosts[12]. Additionally, refugees are free to participate in the economy through the legal authorization to work and by setting up their own businesses.[13] Moreover, upon arrival, refugees are given land by the Uganda government that they use to grow their own food that they use for home purposes and sell the surplus. This encourages self-reliance instead of the common reliance on aid. This is not to say that refugees are not provided with aid. Refugees are often provided with aid in form of food, medical supplies and in some cases cash handouts. Refugee children are also free to attend the schools they find within their hosts.

Factors that enable integration

Refugees who share cultural similarities with a major population group within the host nation are often well received and treated as an extension of the existing population while those who are culturally different are welcomed with some form of resentment. However, cultural similarities and differences alone cannot explain the different reception that different refugee groups receive. Whether a group can integrate or not also depends on the economic performance of the host nation during a time of the refugee migration and perceptions about security.

Researchers like Matthew Gibney (1999) have shown that cultural similarities between refugees and their host nations is a major factor in the way that refugees are perceived by their host communities. Due to obligations by government to provide for refugees, this particular group of

---

[12] Wamara et al. 2022
[13] Dryden-Peterson & Hovil (2004)

migrants is often viewed to be in competition with the host communities for resources which can lead to resentment[14]. However, this resentment can be alleviated when the refugee group share ethnic affinity with host communities and the hosts view the refugees as an extension of their own group (Gibney, 1996). Additionally, Othwonh Dak (1968) contends that because these ethnic groups are also often communities separated by arbitrary borders, when one faces a crisis, norms of reciprocity cultivated over time are activated and hence the need to help when the other is faced with a crisis.

Many border communities share ethnic and kinship ties, increasing the likelihood that refugees from the other side of the border will be welcomed and assisted (Gibney,1999). Affinities based on ethnicity often have the strength to override perceived economic interests in entry decisions. Some outsiders are seen by political communities not as potential competitors for resources but as part of what might be called the state's "extended family." This is commonly the case with outsiders who possess religious, racial, or linguistic links to the state's dominant ethnic group (Gibney,1999). In this case, no matter what the economic conditions of the country are at the time of the refugee influx, if the refugees share ethnic affinity with existing groups within the country, they will be received with a welcoming attitude.

However, Merkx (2002) argues that reciprocity between the two communities can come under strain when production systems change. Looking at the border of Uganda and what is now South Sudan, Merkx (2002) notes that these communities carried out some form of reciprocal interactions that enabled to them to create some social affinity amongst themselves. However, with the shift from a subsistence-based economy to a market economy led to increased competition and

---

[14] Yang Yang Zhou (unpublished manuscript): How Refugee Resentment Shapes National Identity and Citizen Participation.

less reciprocity between the communities. This has inherently strained the relationship between refugees in South Sudan and host communities in Northern Uganda as they view themselves as competitors and not as communities that had previously built social and economic ties. Therefore, cultural similarities and other social relationships are insufficient for the integration of refugees.

Other factors that contribute **to** integration is government policies. Uganda's refugee hosting system hinges on self-reliance of refugees who are hosted in refugee settlements instead of camps. The structure of these settlements allows refugees to move freely and interact with local communities. This freedom of movement and interaction has led to the establishment of small markets, churches, schools etc to accommodate the new entrants. In this case, the presence of refugees improves the economic and social life of their hosts.

To encourage self-reliance, refugees are given a plot of land that they use to farm food products. By providing its refugees with plots of land for farming, the government aims to establish a refugee community that can sustain itself especially when it comes to food production. The generosity of the people and government of Uganda in making agricultural land available for refugees has been lauded as a model for other refugee hosting countries. The self-reliance for refugees not only promotes community engagement but also encourages economic development as refugees and hosts trade their surpluses.

Challenges to integration

As alluded to earlier, economic and resource competition is one of the major challenges to integration. The economic capacity of the host country to absorb refugees can either enable or constrain relationship between refugees and their hosts. In a country like Uganda that has a majority of its population living in rural areas and dependent on land for agriculture, economic capacity is determined by factors such as land availability, the carrying capacity of the land,

7

employment patterns, and infrastructure. A refugee influx affects both land availability and the quality of the land by creating or aggravating shortages of land, water, and firewood and by straining the ecosystem (Jacobsen, 1996). Moreover, a refugee influx affects both land availability and the quality of the land by creating or aggravating shortages of land, water, and firewood and by straining the ecosystem (Jacobsen, 1996).

In addition to low economic capacity and limited availability of land, the competition for social services creates competition and builds resentment for refugees from their host communities. Uganda's refugee settlements are located in rural areas with high levels of poverty, poor infrastructure and access to social services.

Resource (Aid) Resentment and Relative deprivation

Refugees fleeing extreme conditions are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and therefore require as much assistance as they can get from their host communities. The different provisions that refugees are given by their host governments and the international aid community is one source of resentment from host communities. Individuals living in areas with a large concentration of refugees can observe these provisions that they sometimes do not have access to (Zhou, forthcoming). This type of resentment, anger, frustration that comes with seeing others get what one believes they are entitled to can be explained by relative deprivation theory. Relative deprivation seeks to explain the "negative effects associated with judgments of one's own status" that is based on their "subjective assessment" of that status (Bernstein & Crosby, 1980; Walker & Pettigrew, 1984). An individual "may feel deprived of some desirable thing relative to their own past, another person, persons, group, ideal, or some other social category" (Walker & Pettigrew, 1984: 302). Relative deprivation centers around comparisons between either the individual and others around them or an individual's groups and other groups. Individuals assess the

deservingness of the out-group in comparison to their in-group. The realization that refugee groups may be "favored" within the communities that they come into can cause resentment that lead hostilities between refugees and their hosts. The failure of the host community to access services that refugees get in form of aid is a weakness of the host government, but in many ways, these communities cannot relay their grievances to their leaders and therefore take their conflict to the refugees instead.

Security Threat (Considerations)

It is additionally argued that immigrant groups fleeing conflict pose a security threat to the native population. One such explanation of this security threat is the migration of conflict from the origin country to the host community especially if these two communities border each other. There is concern that refugee settlements can re-unite aggrieved co-ethnics who might take the opportunity to re-group, draft new members and launch attacks against their origin country (Salehyan, 2006). This then forces the host government to get involved in a war that it previously had no interest in. This security problem is exemplified by Rwandan refugees forming the Rwanda Patriotic Front that consisted of Rwandan refugees who were in Uganda banding and "invaded [Rwanda] from their bases in Uganda to put an end to the genocide and toppled the government in Kigali" (Salehyan, 2008).

Furthermore, male refugees in particular are considered a security threat to their host communities. Security concerns heightened by the male refugees, especially male refugees, include: terrorism, sexual assault, theft and other types of violence (Erisen and Kentmen-Cin 2017; Huysmans 2006; Lahav and Courtemanche 2012; Ward 2019). In some cases, male refugees can

be seen as spies for their origin country and therefore create political tension between the host government and the origin country.[15]

Repatriation[16]

Voluntary repatriation is the voluntary return of refugees to their "home" or origin country[17]. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) established in Article 13 (2) that "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." This article then permits individuals to flee their country in times of crisis and be able to voluntary go back once that crisis is over. Additionally, the cessation clause in the 1951 refugee convention states that once there are changes in conditions in the origin country, "international protection is no longer justified" especially in cases where threats of "persecution" have been eliminated.

Voluntary repatriation can sometimes be as hard as forced displacement on some individuals. Given the protracted nature of conflict in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, some refugee groups have found themselves displaced for over decades and therefore started new lives in their host countries. For such groups to be repatriated means that they will have to leave an environment they are familiar with for one where they have lost connections.

The cessation of the fear if persecution may also not apply to all members of the refugee group. Whereas some individuals may willingly choose to go back to their home country after the condition that caused their forced displacement ceases to exist, some people based on their

---

[15] President Museveni of Uganda has accused the Rwandan government of spying in Uganda using refugees. These accusations and suspicions culminated in the closure of the Katuna/Gatuna border between Rwanda and Uganda. The Rwandan government on the other hand accused Uganda of torturing Rwanda nationals
https://www.cfr.org/blog/kagames-spat-museveni-costing-rwandans;
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-05/rwanda-brings-fresh-arrests-torture-accusations-against-uganda
[16] Note: The 1951 Convention makes no mention of voluntary repatriation
[17] Repatriation must be completely voluntary and in accordance with UNHCR checklist. This is to ensure that host countries are not forcefully returning refugees to a situation where they will be subjected to persecution. The principle of non-refoulement is fundamental in refugee protection

10

individual identities may have real fears of being persecuted and therefore become reluctant to return to their origin countries. Resettlement to a third a country is offered as a solution for those who are unable to return home even after the crisis has ceased due to continued fears of persecution.

Although this allows countries to decree that refugees must return to their home countries, in some cases this notion of voluntary repatriation as led to the forced expulsion of refugees from their host communities. For example, in 1996, Tanzania signed an agreement with the Rwandan government that would see the return of Rwandan refugees in Tanzania back to Rwanda. However, as Whitaker (2002:329) points out, "the Rwandan repatriation from Tanzania in December 1996 can hardly be described as voluntary." In 2003, The Ugandan government, Rwandan government and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reached a similar agreement that would have seen the return of Rwandan refugees in Uganda back to Rwanda.[18] Although some Rwandans returned home, many were reluctant to leave and therefore stayed in Uganda. Below we disuss at some of the reasons behind this reluctance.

<u>The decision to repatriate</u>

What influences the decision to repatriate or not? Karooma (2014) identifies nine conditions that influence an individual's decision to repatriate or and out of those six, she argues that social networks play a vital role.[19] Social networks are connections and ties that individuals make with

---

[18] *Tripartite Agreement Between the Government of Uganda, Government of the Republic of Rwanda and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Voluntary Repatriation of Rwandan Refugees in Uganda to Rwanda*, signed on 23rd July 2003.

[19] Karooma (2014) security; time of exile; access to land; access to social services; international assistance; Uganda's hospitality to refugees and Ugandan laws i.e. the Refugee Act of 2006 which favors refugees; prospects for naturalisation; and personal and family networks as factors that help an individual make the decision to return to their origin country.

people that they come across and these networks help us make sense of and navigate our surroundings. Formally, "migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonimmigrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin" (Massey et al., 1993). Social networks are formed "through process that links origin and destination countries in international migration" (Kritz and Zlotnik 1992; Koser and Pinkerton 2002). The social networks then are able to connect people through space and time. These networks are important in facilitating decision making for migrants especially in situations where there is limited information. Social networks play a vital role in the decision to migrate (where one migrates to) and on how to integrate and survive in this new country. Refugees in Uganda come from neighboring countries that have experience different waves of violence. And given the protracted nature of violence and Uganda's policy on integration, it is not uncommon/surprising that there are established networks (communities) that refugees rely on when they leave their country and come into Uganda. In the refugee camps, they find their countrymates, fellow refugees and a cluster of professionals willing to help them navigate the social, political and economic environment in their new country. In some cases, some refugees are lucky to be reunited with family members that ease the burden of displacement. Once in their country of asylum, refugees also tend to venture out on their own and create new connections and networks. Social networks can be formal (institutionalized) through organizations like UNHCR, NGOs working in the refugee sphere & churches or informal through friends and relatives, interactions with other refugees and members of the community.

In assessing the reluctance of Rwandan refugees in Uganda to return to Rwanda, Karooma (2014:13) found that refugees had "formed social relationships with their kin and non-kin individuals who support them (i.e. the hosts who help them to settle in Uganda) during the

12

repatriation process." These social relationships are not only a coping mechanism for displaced persons but also help refugees in filling the gaps that are left by governments and international organizations. These networks are also important in helping refugees negotiate and make sense of where they consider home. What or where is home for a refugee who has been displaced for more than 20 years, married in their country of asylum, and has formed social and economic networks?

Refugees once settled in their country of asylum tend to seek some form of permanency and therefore set up roots in their new homes. These roots can include the small businesses they start, attaining permanent jobs, inter-marriages between refugees and locals and other social relationships. Refugees – especially those in protracted situations – build new lives in their host communities that is not dissimilar from that of the hosts. To therefore ask individuals to uproot themselves and start a fresh somewhere else not only disrupts the lives of the refugees but that of the communities where they were once settled.

Resettlement

The third solution to Uganda's refugee problem is resettlement of refugees to a third country. Resettlement is the "transfer of refugees" from their first country of entry (asylum) to a third country that offers permanent residency to the refugees selected (UNHCR). The promise of resettlement increases the ability of a host country (first country of asylum) to cope with an influx by transferring part of the refugee population to another country(Jacobsen, 1996; UNHCR). Even though resettlement is offered as a third durable solution, it is often seen as a last resort. In 2018, only 27 countries offered resettlement to 55,700 refugees.[20]Moreover, this resettlement process is long and drawn out and leaves many refugees in limbo as they wait to learn of their fate.

---

[20] For reference, at the end of 2018 there were 20.4 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate
https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/

Resettlement is offered to individuals and groups who are determined to fall into the following categories; "Have Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs, Survivors of Torture and/or Violence, Medical Needs, Women and Girls at Risk, Family Reunification, Children and Adolescents at Risk, and Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions" (UNHCR). Individuals are vetted and interviewed by UNHCR officials to determine their eligibility. In addition to this, individual countries may have their own vetting processes that refugees must undergo in order to be eligible for resettlement.

However, even after being resettled, the grass is not always greener on the other side. In a new comparative study, Heba Gowayed notes tht that in addition to racism resettled refugees are often faced with new challenges. Many find that the skills they held back home are not transferrable as their new countries have different assessments for "human capital," many are "thrust into poverty" due to inefficient social assistance (Gowayed, 2022). Here we see that resettled refugees face the same kinds of integration issues discussed earlier.

Furthermore, refugees are often thrust into the murky political fields of their new homes and met with anti-immigrant rhetoric. For example, former chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel was met with backlash from officials in her own party of members of the opposition after her decision to welcome Syrian refugees (Mushaben, 2017). Worries about competition for jobs in a country that had barely survived the Eurozone crisis and the threat of cultural "contamination" from a group that was seen as distinctly different and unable to integrate into society drove yet many more into the arms of right-wing political parties like the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and movements like the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA)[21].

---

[21] Anti-immigration sentiments that are predicated on racism and racist tropes have become a mobilization tool for most groups in Western societies. Immigrants whether economic or refugees have become a scapegoat for all things that natives consider wrong with their countries from unemployment to poor social services.

Such sentiments not only threaten the physical well-being of resettled refugees but can also

jeopardize their ability to fully integrate into their new communities.

https://www.politico.eu/article/asylum-pegida-refugees-far-right-protest-seekers-as-criminals-politicians-as-traitors/
https://theworld.org/stories/2015-12-10/germany-s-refugee-crisis-fueling-far-right-pegida-movement
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-germany-pegida/german-anti-islam-protest-swells-on-fears-about-refugee-influx-idUSKCN0SD11820151019