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Overcoming ruptures: Zande identity, governance, and tradition during cycles of war and displacement in South Sudan and Uganda (2014-2019)

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7 | Encountering the state upon arrival: aid, papers, and land in Uganda (2015-2019)

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the research question: How did South Sudanese Zande refugees arrive and settle in Uganda, what were their initial concerns, and how was their experience mediated by their varying encounters with the Ugandan state bureaucracy (2015-9)? Much of the rich literature on refugee settlements and camps, is based on research conducted years or even decades after people's displacement (Liisa H. Malkki 1995; Jansen 2016; McConnachie 2014; Agier 2002). This is true, also, for literature on refugee settlements in Uganda, which has been hosting refugees for decades (Kaiser 2000; Betts et al. 2019). This chapter rather focuses on the crucial first phase of refugees' arrival (first half year). Like 'running' (see Chapter 6), arrival was full of dilemmas and choices – where and with whom to live, what to invest scarce resources in, how to deal with the 'refugee administration' – which shaped peoples' lives not just for the duration of exile, but for the rest of their lives and those of their children.

This chapter makes one descriptive contribution and three more theoretical ones. First, this chapter offers a detailed description of the first phase of arrival of Western Equatorian refugees in Uganda. This description considers in particular: 1) the legal, geographical, and governance context in which refugees arrived; 2) Uganda's state policies and bureaucratic practices which facilitated or hindered the refugees' settling; and 3) what refugees did themselves upon arrival (e.g., first concerns, intra-household and individual tactics) and their responses to the state (e.g., avoiding or bribing state bureaucrats, resorting to the informal market). This descriptive account foregrounds refugees' perspectives.

From this descriptive account follow three more theoretical points in relation to the literature on refugee categorisation or labelling, and the temporality of refugee settlements. Refugees and Ugandan state officials differed in their conceptualisation both of 'refugees' and of the 'refugee settlement'. Classical refugee studies have shown how refugees pose a problem to the state and the 'national order of things' (L.H. Malkki 1995; Nyers 1998). 'Refugees' are people who crossed an international border and were granted a protection status by a state. From this perspective, refugees literally came into being at the border. Similarly, they cease to be the concern of the host state through one of the 'permanent solutions' proposed by UNHCR: return, local integration

or resettlement. In other words: Life in the refugee settlements is not meant to be permanent, it remains exceptional even if it can very well be 'protracted' for decades (Turner 2015b, 142). This chapter will show how Ugandan refugee administrators saw refugees more or less in these terms: As governance problems to be solved (see Section 7.2) and as people who ought not to display 'occupation characteristics' (see Section 7.5). What is more, in their eyes 'refugee' was a 'master status-determining trait', which 'tends to overpower ... any other characteristics which might run counter to it' (Hughes 1945).

This chapter contributes to this literature the markedly different perspectives of 'new' refugees themselves. There are three points: First, Western Equatorians in Uganda actively pursued the 'refugee' label for the advantages it offered (see Section 7.4), but their self-perception was rarely (often situationally) defined by it. They remained well-aware that this 'refugee influx', like many others, had 'extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes and involve people who, while all displaced, find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments' (L.H. Malkki 1995, 496). Indeed, South Sudanese refugees in Uganda were especially diverse, partly because they were offered *prima facie* refugee status (see Section 7.2). Every South Sudanese person I met in Uganda had registered as refugee or was planning to do so. And so, the refugee label covered a great diversity of Western Equatorians in Uganda. They included the great-grandson of King Gbudwe in Arua, a destitute single mother who shared a one-room mud hut with 13 children, a former state minister who came to meet me at a Kampala hotel in his Land Cruiser and insisted on paying for our drinks, and students who had come to Uganda years prior to war's eruption (see Sections 6.7 and 7.4).¹ This is important to keep in mind: All the groups I refer to in these chapters (e.g., 'refugees', 'Zande', or 'South Sudanese Zande in Uganda') were extraordinarily diverse.

The second point and related point, is that beyond these ample differences within the Western Equatorian refugee population in Uganda, an important similarity was that they typically endeavoured to keep the long view of their predicament. They knew that they were not born at the border. Instead, they saw their 'refugeeness' as an episode in a longer life, with particular biographies, opportunities and aspirations leading to the present, and out of it into the future. From previous cycles of war, displacement and return, they knew that war does not freeze societal change and social mobility, but can change or catalyse it. Like after the Second Sudanese Civil War when returnees from America, Australia, and the UK took up office and cabinet jobs (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5). And so, during 'this war of yesterday', people who had the *ability* to do so, often made *aspirational* decisions – informed by past experiences and future hopes – about where to 'run' and how to spend displace-

1 The former minister was individually targeted for being part of Bakosoro's cabinet (see Section 6.2), the single mother had fled generalized violence. The former would meet the UN Refugee Convention's requirement of persecution, the latter would not.

ment (see Chapter 6). In this way, renewed exile posed continuity as well as change.

Third, the confrontation between this extraordinarily diverse ‘refugee population’ (for lack of a better word) and the Ugandan refugee bureaucracy, resulted in diverse experiences of refugee life in Uganda. Recall how when war started, some people had been unable to leave Western Equatoria while the better-off were able to send their families to Uganda (see Chapter 6). In a similar vein, refugees faced dilemmas and obstacles in Uganda, often posed by corrupt local bureaucrats (see Section 7.6), which they were unequally equipped to navigate. Some refugees were able to exploit the ambiguous gap between law and practice, while others got stuck. And so, both *leaving* from Western Equatoria and *arriving* and settling in Uganda (see Chapter 7) were shaped by, and in turn shaped, a hierarchy of displacement: from the ‘involuntary immobile’ stuck in a warzone, to the diasporic elite in the West. The effects of these inequalities were much-debated among refugees themselves.

To make these arguments, this chapter proceeds as follows. After a brief introduction on Uganda’s refugee policy and administration (see Section 7.2), I introduce the main town and refugee settlement where I conducted my research (see Section 7.3). Then I disentangle the many ways Western Equatorians ‘arrived’ here (see Section 7.4.1), secured documentation (see Section 7.4.2) and aid (see Section 7.4.3), and continued to move (see Section 7.4.3). The next section explores some of the problems around land allocation in the refugee settlement (see Section 7.5.1), the workings of the informal land market (see Section 7.5.2), and the dramatic effects of a locally-instituted ban against refugees constructing houses with ‘permanent materials’ (see Section 7.5.3). The last section deals with fraud and corruption in the refugee response, and the ‘verification’ response (see Section 7.6). Throughout these sections I highlight the differentiating effects of displacement, and refugees’ interactions with Ugandan street-level bureaucrats. The next chapter will delve deeper into the next phase of refugees’ presence in Uganda, when existential questions become more pressing and refugees make various attempts to order or govern ‘their people’ in exile, and to keep sight of the future.

7.2 UGANDA’S REFUGEE POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

Uganda hosts the largest refugee population in Africa, and its refugee policies have been called ‘among the most progressive’ (World Bank and UNHCR 2016) and a ‘model’ (Malango 2018). For much of its long history of hosting refugees, Uganda has had elements of the current refugee policy – i.e. distributing aid both to ‘hosts’ and refugees, allocating land to refugees – but it used to host refugees in closed refugee settlements (Kaiser 2000; Hovil and Werker 2001;

Kaiser 2006a; 2010; Refugee Law Project 2005).² Since the Refugees Act (2006) and the Refugee Regulations (2010) refugees are entitled to freedom of movement and work, and to education and health care on the same terms as Ugandan nationals. To avoid friction with the often also poor Ugandan host communities, the government has issued a '70:30' directive that 'entitles hosts to a share of 30 percent of the interventions supporting refugees' (UNDP 2018).³ Further, the government proposes an 'integrated' approach to socio-economic welfare, where refugees and host communities 'coexist and share common services' (International Rescue Committee 2018). Ugandans can access the public facilities which donors built for the refugees: schools, roads, hospitals, churches.⁴ In this way, the Ugandan government hopes to harness the refugee influx and accompanying donor money for the development of remote and less-developed areas.⁵ Uganda's refugee policy further emphasizes refugees' self-reliance, famously offering refugees a plot of land to live and farm on (Goldstein 2018; Betts et al. 2019; Schiltz et al. 2019).⁶ Ultimately the vision is that refugee settlements become self-subsistent so that food aid can be phased out (UNHCR 2018b). This is the general vision. This chapter will show how some facets of the refugee policy are implemented differently in practice.

2 Kaiser argues that the Control of Alien Refugees Act (1964) was strict but that its implementation was not, as 'government personnel are quick to point out that in practice, the harsher components of the 1964 legislation are not enforced' (Kaiser 2000, 8).

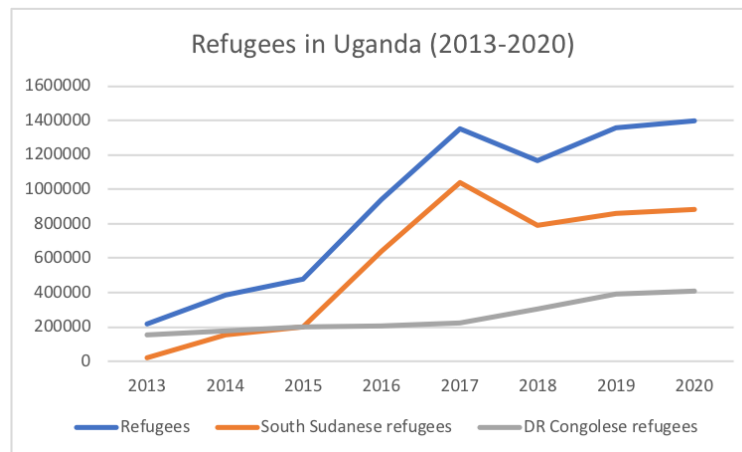
3 The 70:30 rule excludes food assistance which is exclusively received by refugees.

4 This principle, too, predates the recent policy changes: In the late 1990s Uganda had a 'refugee affected area approach' under which 40 percent of UNHCR-assistance was directed to surrounding areas (Kaiser 2000, 6).

5 Articulated in 'Self-Reliance Strategy' (1999) and the more recent updated 'Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) strategic framework' (2016). As well as the Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA), part of Uganda's National Development Plan II.

6 Specifically, the Refugee Regulations, 65: 1 stipulate that: 'A refugee who is residing in a designated refugee settlement or a refugee area shall have free access to use land for the purposes of cultivation or pasturing, except that they shall have no right to sell, lease or otherwise alienate the land that has been allocated to them strictly for their individual or family utilization' (Parliament of Uganda 2010).

Figure 9: Refugees in Uganda (2013-20). Source: Made by author based on UNHCR Refugee Data Finder.⁷



Uganda's generous refugee policies have in recent years applied to record numbers of refugees. In many other countries, asylum seekers struggle for recognition (Idris 2005; Edward 2007) and have to prove that they were persecuted, as per the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, in line with the OAU's Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1969), Uganda's 2006 Refugees Act considers that a person also qualifies for refugee status if they were 'compelled to leave his or her place of habitual residence' by, among other factors, 'events seriously disturbing public order' (Article 4: c). This is a much wider conceptualization of 'refugees.' Further, in Article 25, the Refugees Act stipulates that the Minister may, especially when there is a mass influx, declare a group or class of people as refugees or alternatively offer asylum seekers temporarily 'the same general treatment and rights' as refugees (Parliament of Uganda 2006). This is what happened after the South Sudanese Civil War erupted, and 'given the magnitude of the emergency' Uganda granted 'prima facie' recognition for refugees from South Sudan.⁸ Fuelled by wars in neighbouring countries, Uganda has become the largest refugee hosting country in Africa. Refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo were the largest group until 2016.⁹ Especially after the escalation in July 2016, South Sudanese refugees became the largest group in Uganda (see Chapter 6).

South Sudanese refugees in Uganda were hosted mostly in settlements in north-western West Nile region, with smaller numbers in Kiryandongo RS

⁷ Figures for South Sudanese refugees in Uganda were only available from 2012.

⁸ Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan did the same.

⁹ They were hosted especially in refugee settlements in (south-)western Uganda: especially in Kyangwali, Rwamwanja, Kyaka II, and Nakivale.

and elsewhere (see Map 1). The best estimates are that some 92-95 percent of refugees in Uganda live in refugee settlements (UNHCR 2018b), while the rest have self-settled without government assistance in Kampala and Arua, and in smaller towns like Bweyale and Koboko. Note: The 2018 drop in refugee numbers results not from a decrease in actual refugees, but in a correction of the registration system. By April 2021, there were estimated to be some 911,646 South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. By way of comparison, at the height of the Second Sudanese War in the 1990s there were some 244,780 refugees in Uganda, mostly from Southern Sudan (Hovil 2010, 6). The scale and speed of the recent refugee influx was unprecedented.

Map 3: Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Uganda, August 2020. Source: UNHCR (2019).

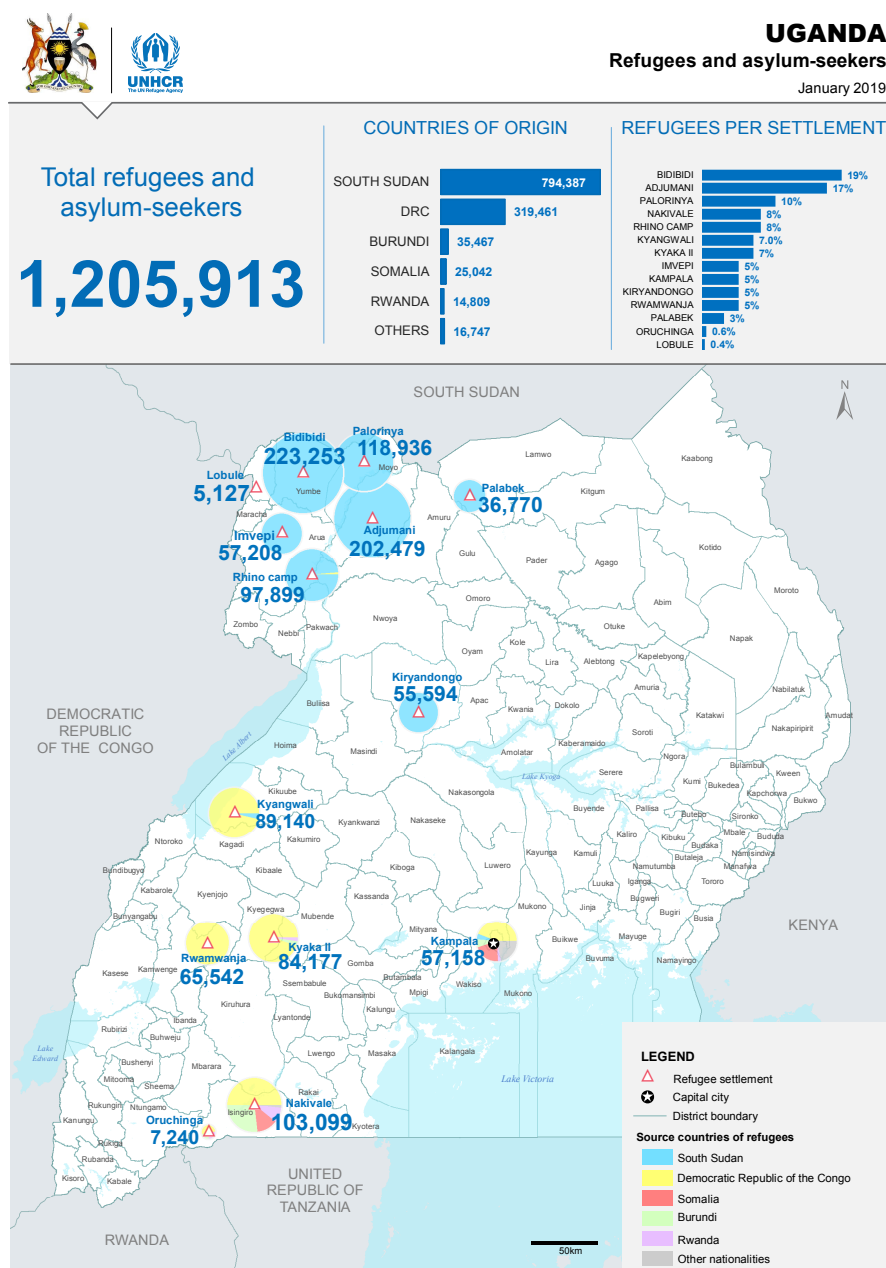


Table 5: Uganda's refugee governance hierarchy

Country	Cabinet
	Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)
	Ministry for Disaster Preparedness, Management and Refugees
	Commissioner for Refugees
Region	Refugee desk officers (Arua for West Nile, Hoima for Kiryandongo)
Settlement	Camp Commandant + staff
	Refugee Welfare Council 3 (RWC)
Range	Refugee Welfare Council 2 (RWC)
Cluster/Zone	Refugee Welfare Council 1 (RWC)

Refugee governance or 'administration' in Uganda is primarily the responsibility of the Ministry for Disaster Preparedness, Management and Refugees, which falls under the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM).¹⁰ The highest bureaucrat for refugee governance is the Commissioner for Refugees in Kampala. Under him, there are various 'refugee desk officers' in refugee-hosting areas: for example, in Hoima (overseeing a.o. Kiryandongo RS) and Arua (overseeing the settlements in West Nile). At the settlement level, there are OPM 'camp commandants' with deputies and other staff. These commandants rely on a large network of 'refugee welfare councils' (RWCs): refugees who are either elected by other refugees or appointed by OPM, to represent a particular section of the settlement. Although these RWC's are significant in refugee *governance* (see Chapter 8), I reserve the term *bureaucrats* for state officials. Especially at the district-level (below region) and further down, local government also 'plans and delivers services to refugees and host communities' (World Bank and UNHCR 2016).

¹⁰ Although the Ministry is a cabinet-level government ministry, its work – like that of various other ministries – is overseen by OPM.

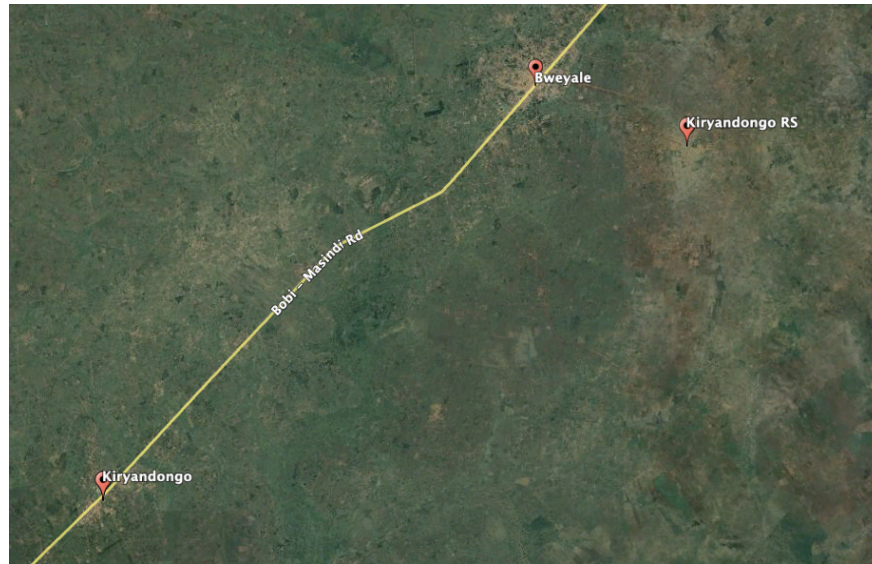
This governance structure is not a fixed and unitary bureaucratic machine implementing policies and laws in the Weberian rational-legal sense (Sharma and Gupta 2005). The implementation of the famed refugee policies and principles ‘from Kampala,’ ultimately rests on the shoulders of local street-level bureaucrats who face various constraints and an unprecedented refugee influx. They sometimes complain that the refugee policy gives them a lot of responsibilities, but not the commensurate time and resources. And so they devise ‘practical norms’ (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014) to deal with their most pressing concerns. Although there are many OPM officials who work honestly and in the interest of refugees, the 2018 OPM corruption scandal (after which the refugee registration system was corrected, and biometric registration introduced) suggests that malpractices are widespread, too (Sserungogi et al. 2018; Sserungogi 2018; UNHCR 2018c). All this means that there is considerable room for discretion and negotiation between Kampala’s laws and settlement-level implementation. South Sudanese refugees frequently complain about OPM, although as this chapter will show some also navigate ‘the system’ with great acumen.

7.3 SETTING THE SCENE: KIRYANDONGO RS AND BWEYALE

7.3.1 Refugee settlement and boom town

Most of my research took place in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, and the nearby town Bweyale. Bweyale is on the tarmacked main road between Kampala to the south (220 km, 4 hours) and the Ugandan north – Arua and Gulu – and South Sudan beyond (415 km to Juba). Its proximity to Bweyale and the busy main road, renders Kiryandongo less isolated than the refugee settlements in West Nile (where most South Sudanese refugees live). The area typically has good rains and the land is arable and fertile, allowing for cultivation. There is also a piped water system that the more well-off can afford. Many Western Equatorial refugees found this the most desirable Ugandan settlement, and then once a small community had been established more Western Equatorians gravitated here just to be in the vicinity of relatives and acquaintances.

Map 4: Kiryandongo, Bweyale, and Kiryandongo RS. Source: Selection by author on Google Earth (2020).



Bweyale's history is intrinsically connected to the periodic arrival of conflict migrants to the nearby Kiryandongo refugee settlement, some 2 km to the southeast.¹¹ The area to the east of Bweyale had been gazetted as a cattle ranching area in the 1970s and remained largely uninhabited until 1990. At that time, Bweyale counted just 80 homesteads and most of the land was 'idle and bushy' (Wandera 2018). In 1990, the Ugandan government opened a transit camp here for southern Sudanese refugees, mostly ethnic Acholi, which eventually grew into a refugee camp (Kaiser 2006b; 2000).¹² The refugees were later joined by Ugandan internally displaced people – also ethnic Acholi – from Gulu and Kitgum who fled the LRA. In the 1990s, UNHCR considered Kiryandongo a success story of refugee self-sufficiency, and used the settlement as a showcase for visitors. In 1995 the settlement was formally 'closed to new arrivals apart from those reuniting with immediate family members' (Kaiser 2000, 4) and UNHCR withdrew its support in 1998 arguing that refugees were now self-sufficient. Still by 2000 Kiryandongo RS counted some 12,000 (south-

11 The region's history with forced migration and refugees goes back at least to 1954 when some 50 km south of Bweyale, 'Kenyan refugees were resettled by the British to Kigumba area' (Kaiser 2000, 5).

12 Initially, people were placed in a 'transit camp.' The process of allocating plots only started in 1992. By 1996 UNHCR decided most people in the camp were self-sufficient, and withdrew food rations (Kaiser 2000).

ern) Sudanese refugees (Kaiser 2000, 2). Since that time (Southern) Sudanese,¹³ Ugandans,¹⁴ Kenyans, Congolese, and Rwandans continued to come and go in small numbers. Yet for years the population largely dwindled. By December 2012, UNHCR estimated the population at 3,652 refugees and IDPs (Ahumuza, Odokonyero, and Outeke 2012, 7). August 2013, the area hosted an estimated 25,000 IDP's and refugees (Lwanga and White 2013).

Bweyale and Kiryandongo RS really boomed anew, when the settlement was formally reopened to 'new arrivals' in 2014 in response to the South Sudanese Civil War. The largest single influx came after 'July 2016' (see Chapter 6) when in just three months, some 19,730 new South Sudanese people arrived in Kiryandongo RS (Mwanamwolho and Lwanga 2017). Resultantly, the settlement was again formally closed to new arrivals in 2017, although refugees continued to arrive (see Section 7.4).¹⁵ By June 2020, UNHCR estimated that Kiryandongo was home to over 67,000 refugees, of whom some 66,000 South Sudanese (OPM and UNHCR 2020).¹⁶ Refugees certainly outnumbered 'hosts', but crucially most Ugandans that lived here, too, traced origins elsewhere. Bweyale was historically a Bunyoro town, but Munyoro became outnumbered by ethnic Acholi, many of whom arrived here after they were displaced by the LRA.¹⁷

In a matter of 20 years, Bweyale grew from a 'bus stop to get to the refugee camp'¹⁸ into a displacement boom town of over 30,000 (Murahashi 2021).¹⁹ Over the years, many better-off IDP's and refugees have settled in town instead of the settlement. The settlement was mostly quiet and time was slow, but Bweyale was bustling (see Section 8.2). Other migrants from within Uganda and abroad also came to the town, hoping to profit from the new 'market'. This abundance of migrants and traders made Bweyale feel more cosmopolitan and alive than other similar-sized towns in Uganda, or even the district capital, Kiryandongo. In the market one heard Swahili, Luo-languages, Juba Arabic,

13 Excluding the south (which was until 2011 of course part of Sudan), Sudanese people also fled this way from conflicts in Darfur and South Kordofan.

14 There were two groups of Ugandans: Thousands displaced from northern Uganda due to the war with the LRA in the 1990s, and hundreds displaced by the Bududa landslides more recently.

15 The camp was not physically closed and there were barely any checks on who went in and out. But living in the settlement unregistered would be difficult: One could not get land, aid or other services (see Sections 7.3 and 7.4). See also Kaiser, 2000 on the 'un-registered' people in Kiryandongo RS back in the 1990s.

16 In June 2020, OPM estimated that the South Sudanese refugees in Kiryandongo RS number some 67,043. The other groups (DR Congo, Sudan, Kenya, Burundi and Rwanda, respectively) amount to some 650.

17 The town also hosts many other ethnic groups, such as Alur, Lugbara, Muganda and Lango.

18 Interview with 50-year-old South Sudanese, Bweyale, 29 May 2019.

19 Precise figures are hard to come by, especially as the town keeps growing rapidly.

English and Luganda.²⁰ An Ethiopian restaurant, Somali bar, South Sudanese hotel, Shell gas station, (north) Sudanese supermarket and Kenyan boda drivers were all part of the vibrant and growing trading centre.

Map 5: Key sites in central and western part of Kiryandongo RS, January 2014. Source: Selection by author on Google Earth.



Map 6: Key sites in central and western part of Kiryandongo RS, December 2018. Source: Selection by author on Google Earth.



The sprawling unfenced Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement rapidly grew beyond the original 38,5 square km concession area (UNHCR 2016). The settlement formally began at the main entrance gate where OPM and the Ugandan police shared a compound (see Map above). Adjacent were the UNHCR-offices and the WFP-warehouse. This was the administrative centre of the settlement,

20 Juba Arabic and countless other Ugandan and South Sudanese languages are also spoken. Interview with 30-year-old Ugandan, Bweyale, 29 May 2019. Kaiser found similar diversity in Bweyale in the late 1990s (Kaiser 2000).

although there was also a 'Reception Centre' further inside where OPM received new arrivals, and allocated plots of land to them.

Kiryandongo RS had two main trading centres, which included supermarkets, hair salons, tailors, video halls and restaurants.²¹ But business was comparatively slow here, as most people preferred the cheaper shops in Bweyale. Along the settlement's main murram (laterite) roads, refugees operated small shops selling 'mixed goods': candy, heavy liquor, fizzy drinks, salt, soap, airtime and razor blades. Exceptionally, one Western Equatorial man had set up 'Mbikoyezu's House of Sweets', a bakery with a self-made stone oven two meters across. He employed some 10 other refugees to bake and sell baked goods.

7.3.2 Host-refugee relations and the value of land

Due to the history described above, the distinction between 'refugees' and 'hosts' was less clear in Bweyale than elsewhere. Some of those foreign nationals with refugee status were, in a way, 'returnees' who had lived in Kiryandongo RS in the 1990s or were even born there. Many of the Ugandans who now called Bweyale home, had also been displaced in living memory. Some were even refugees in South Sudan after the fall of Idi Amin. These similar histories, partly help to explain why many Ugandans were welcoming of the refugees, and refugee-host relations were generally quite good (International Refugee Rights Initiative 2019).

This virtuousness was often assuaged by economic self-interest. The District Chairperson of Kiryandongo, Charles Ntarehoki Amooti, said: 'As a host community we are not regretting hosting the refugees because we have benefited a lot from them' ('Hospitality Boosts Bweyale' 2018). Ugandans sold agricultural produce, ran shops, or secured lucrative jobs with the Ugandan government or aid organizations in the settlement. Some 70 percent of refugees in Uganda lived in extreme poverty, compared to 25 percent of rural Ugandans (OPM et al. 2020, viii). But there was a minority of visible refugees who were wealthy by Bweyale standards, and garnered South Sudanese the reputation for spending lavishly (and not haggling as much in the market).

Landholding Ugandans around Kiryandongo benefited enormously from the conflict-induced growth of Bweyale (Wandera 2018). Kiryandongo RS is on public land, but especially after the rapid growth some Ugandans rented out land outside the settlement area to refugees. Others set up sharecropping arrangements, or shared their land with the newcomers out of solidarity and

21 One by the Reception Centre, and one on the main hill close to the hospital and several churches.

to cement new ties of reciprocity (Byaruhanga 2017).²² My guesthouse, New Doral, grew increasingly ‘downtown’ over the years of my visits.²³ The metamorphosis turned some landholding Ugandans from subsistence farmers into landlords. These landlords preferred direct deals with the refugees, to the often opaque terms under which the Ugandan government leased customary land for the settlements in West Nile (Zakaryan 2018; Vancluysen and Ingelaere 2020).²⁴ There, Ugandans worried that once refugees go back, the state will ‘grab’ their land.

For landless Ugandans, however, life became more difficult with the arrival of especially the better-off South Sudanese refugees, as rent and food became more expensive. The arrival of refugees in Bweyale sparked a complicated process of displacement-driven gentrification, with some of the poorer Ugandans moving from Bweyale to district capital Kiryandongo where rents were cheaper, while still commuting back to Bweyale for work. As property prices rose, tension over land also increased among Ugandans (Oketch and Ebong 2018).²⁵ In rural Uganda as in South Sudan, claims to land (ownership more so than access) were often tied to autochthony, and so rising land prices have sharpened debates about belonging (see also Chapter 4).

7.4 ARRIVAL: BORDER TACTICS, GETTING PAPER, AND CONTESTED MOBILITY

Sections 7.2 and 7.3 have set the stage, now we turn to the more micro-level deliberations and dilemmas that Western Equatorians who sought refuge in Uganda faced, and how this impacted their experience in exile and their ideas about life beyond. Much of this section and the next, focuses on interactions between Ugandan bureaucrats (often OPM) and South Sudanese refugees.

22 Albert was offered various pieces of land to cultivate for free. ‘They don’t need anything from me, they are not charging a single coin.’ Interview with refugee chairperson from Ezo, Rhino Camp, 18 May 2017.

23 A man who grew up in Bweyale in the 1990s, said that the area where New Doral now stands used to be bushy, and that they ‘used to catch birds’ there. Interview with 30-year-old Ugandan, Bweyale, 29 May 2019.

24 In Kiryandongo, most of the refugees are on public land. But in West Nile, government has leased land from customary owners, often under unclear terms.

25 In a survey by HiiL, disputes over land ownership and tenure came up as ‘the most prevalent category of justice needs in Uganda’ (21 percent nationally, 24 percent in north Uganda) (‘Justice Needs in Uganda: Legal Problems in Daily Life’ 2016).

Figure 10: UNHCR truck at the South Sudan – Uganda – DR Congo tripoint. Source: Photo by author, 2018.



7.4.1 Border tactics: Refugee or visitor?

Where and how Western Equatorians crossed the border to Uganda, affected their life as refugees. The basic choice at the border was to register as a refugee directly, or to buy a tourist visa. People who opted for the first option were brought to ‘transit centres’ run by OPM and UNHCR, where a first registration took place: name, photo, family members, when you arrived, and origin in South Sudan.²⁶ From the transit centre, refugees were put on onward transport to a settlement – typically in West Nile – where they would be registered further at the ‘reception centre’. Many Western Equatorians were ‘scattered’ in this way across and within a dozen refugee settlements, some of which are too rocky and dusty to farm in.

Refugees’ experiences of arrival in the settlements varied: some were helped by OPM quite quickly, others waited for weeks to be registered. Illustrative of the more troubled experiences, is this account of a female refugee from Yambio who was initially settled in Rhino Camp refugee settlement, after which she and her children moved to Arua town:

26 Interview with English refugee specialist, Kampala, 30 April 2018.

We spent three days in Keri [a transit centre], and were taken to Rhino Camp. While at Rhino camp, I shed tears ... Water and accommodation were big problems. Even cattle were passing over us as we slept, and I thought it would be better if I remained in South Sudan. There were translators for other tribes in the reception centre, but not for Zande, even up to now. Other tribes were registered and fought for their own people. Some people stay for seven days before they were relocated to their individual plots, but we stayed for about a month. In Wanyange, where we were finally relocated, there were no Zande. I stayed there for three days, but was not comfortable. As such, I asked the OPM that we wanted to come to Arua. They gave us a document, and we came to stay here.²⁷

This quote points to a number of important themes of initial settlement: the amenities in the settlements, ethnic cohabitation, the pace of OPM's bureaucratic processes, the anxiety of living without other Zande, and people's aspirations to move to town if they can.

An alternative option at the border, was not to register as a refugee but instead to buy a tourist visa (50 USD) saying, for instance, that you came to visit relatives. Western Equatorians who did this could then independently travel to a town or refugee settlement of their choice. Some Western Equatorian refugees self-settled without government assistance in towns like Kampala and Arua, often staying with relatives or acquaintances who had arrived earlier. Towns were associated with better schools and more economic opportunities. Those who fled persecution or assassinations often preferred the anonymity of towns over the settlements, where they would live in proximity of other South Sudanese. Urban refugees, however, were not given aid and generally struggled to find work. Only a small relatively well-off group of people could afford life in Kampala and Arua for long, with some even buying property there.²⁸

Some of the once-privileged South Sudanese students also registered for refugee status after the war broke out. They had often come to Uganda during the good years around independence (2011), when their parents could afford the costs of education. The conflict-related economic crisis in South Sudan often meant that these students no longer received parental support, and that they had to drop out. Some have since moved to the settlements, a variant of 'displacement by absence' (Kunz 1973, 142).²⁹ Legally an application for refugee status has to be made within 30 days of arrival.³⁰ So students have

27 Not her real name. Interview with 33-year-old female refugee from Yambio, Arua, 24 August 2017.

28 Perhaps a few hundred people in both cities. Around Kampala, there were groups in Namugongo, Zana, Kabalagala, Rubaga, and Kajansi.

29 Kunz defines 'displacement by absence' as those 'individuals who left their country of origin peacefully, under normal circumstances, but who refuse to return there after the turn of events.'

30 Refugees Regulations (2010) Article 3: 1 stipulates that an application for refugee status in Uganda should be made 'within thirty days after the date of entry into Uganda.'

to be creative to get the refugee status. One Zande student (born in 1993) had stayed in Uganda since 2002, obtaining all his education there. He said:

I don't consider myself a refugee because I came for studies ... I wanted to register with OPM in Kampala, but they wanted my South Sudanese national ID and I didn't have that. I also went to Bweyale but it was closed when I came. So now I plan to go to Yumbe [close to the South Sudanese border] to register as a refugee. I'll say that I've just arrived so I should not act too smart. Then I can get the card.³¹

This young man did not consider himself a 'refugee', but nonetheless wanted 'the card', saying, 'Our country is not stable, there may be war at any time and there is an economic crisis. When you have the card there are opportunities.' He was conscious that in order to be granted this status close to the border, he would have to look and behave differently – not like a Kampala-based student, but like a stereotypical 'fresh' refugee running from South Sudan.

Refugees in the settlement often looked at the refugees in town (Zande: *aboro bata*, English: city people), sometimes their own relatives, as a distinct and more privileged group. One elderly refugee, for example, had lived in Khartoum during the previous civil war but now stayed in Rhino Camp:

Those who remain in town, those are refugees that planned for it. Some were even here before the war, but then registered as refugees when we came running from South Sudan. The refugees in the camps are those who are suffering.³²

Yet it was difficult to draw neat distinctions between town and settlement refugees in Uganda. Many refugees who initially settled in town eventually moved part of the family to the refugee settlements, where food aid, medical care, education, and a small plot of land were free. Illustrative in this regard was the story of James and his nine family members:

We arrived in February 2016 and settled [in Kampala] for almost 6 months. We decided to live there. But life in the city is not that easy. We decided to move here ... Because for me I have a big family. It is only me who is responsible for it ... So I decided to come [to the settlement] because this is where I can cultivate the land and get some potato, cassava, and other food stuffs free of charge. But there? No. Charcoal, firewood, water, it is all for money. Even movement is for money!³³

Crucially, many households split to accommodate family members' different needs. One common pattern was that the father stayed in South Sudan or returned there, while mother and children lived in Uganda for safety and

31 Interview with 24-year-old student in Kampala, 20 March 2017.

32 Interview with 58-year-old former chief, Rhino Camp, 13 March 2018.

33 Interview with James, Kiryandongo, 5 August 2017.

education (see Section 6.7).³⁴ Many women also took care of children that were not biologically theirs. These sorts of tactics were reflected to some extent in the statistics: Some 85 percent of the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda were women and children (C. Robinson 2017; UNHCR 2018a; CARE 2011). Families often split further in Uganda: with primary school-going children staying with their mother in the settlement, and the adolescents staying in Ugandan towns for further schooling. So a single pre-conflict 'household' may well be split into various bureaucratic categories: 'stayees', 'IDPs', 'urban refugees' and 'settlement refugees.'

As with leaving South Sudan (Chapter 6), the border-crossing and settling tactics in Uganda were not equally available to all. Some Western Equatorians could afford to choose their destination, others got to the border and hoped for the best. Often, Western Equatorial refugees had managed to mobilize money to flee by selling assets, taking out savings, or by asking rich relatives or acquaintances. It was typically considerably harder to find money for maintenance in exile. Many refugee women in Uganda even complained that their husbands in South Sudan had stopped sending remittances. Some had not heard from their husbands for months, and which 'reduced them' to 'living on UNHCR' (see Chapter 8). Being well-off enough to run from war, did not mean that people could live well in exile.

7.4.2 Getting papers

Once people arrived in the refugee settlement, they engaged in a series of bureaucratic processes to get three documents: the attestation document, the ration card, and the refugee ID. The evolution of formal and informal bureaucratic practices and the role of individual bureaucrats, were the topic of frequent conversations among refugees. They were thoroughly aware of the need to have 'papers' to safeguard their claim to stay in Uganda, and to access aid and government services. As in South Sudan, (advanced) knowledge of the bureaucracy and impending changes were vital to survival and welfare in the settlement.

The initial family refugee attestation document was a simple A4-paper issued by OPM, which included: the date and place of issue, the individual and group number, the allocated plot number, the name and photo, year of birth, nationality of the head of household, as well as the names and photos, years of birth and numbers for all the family members. At this stage, many families registered the wife as 'head of household', also when the husband had come along. Female-headed households were entitled to specific kinds of aid, and some men feared that being registered as 'head of household' in the settlement would make it easier for anyone (especially South Sudan's

34 Polygamous families sometimes split differently.

intelligence services) to trace them.³⁵ As households often split with men traveling back to South Sudan, having the woman as formal ‘head of household’ also ensured that the family was represented vis-à-vis the government and aid organizations, and that no opportunities would be missed.

The ration card was issued by UNHCR and WFP for the whole household and included: the size of the household (maximum 16 people), numbers 1 to 34 for the monthly ‘distribution cycle’, letters A to J for the non-food items, a barcode and card number, and – on the back – the cardholder’s name. The ration card had to be presented by any household member when they came to collect their aid. With a hole puncher, UNHCR staff would mark the household size, and the aid distributions.³⁶

Figure 11: Anonymised ration card. Source: Photo by author, 2018.



Refugees could also apply for a ‘refugee ID’. In the camp, from 2018 people worried that they would not be considered ‘refugees’ if they had no ID.³⁷ Young urban refugees hoped that, ‘when you have the card there are opportunities,’ and listed scholarships, sim cards, and movement less inhibited by government checks.³⁸ On paper, refugees could only travel abroad after being granted a separate temporary travel document by OPM, for which they would

³⁵ Interview with 31-year-old Moru refugee, Rhino Camp, 18 May 2017.

³⁶ For a detailed description of the refugee documentation and the relevant processes, refer to the UNHCR website, ‘Implementing registration within an identity management framework’ at <https://www.unhcr.org/registration-guidance/chapter5/documentation/> [Accessed on 23 August 2019].

³⁷ Interview with 58-year-old former chief, Rhino Camp, 13 March 2018.

³⁸ Interview with Zande student, Kampala, 5 March 2018; Interview with 24-year-old student in Kampala, 20 March 2017.

first have to surrender any passport of the country of origin.³⁹ This document would nonetheless not be valid for their country of origin, South Sudan.⁴⁰ The reasoning underlying these laws is straightforward: Refugees seek protection in Uganda because their country of origin is unsafe and they cannot live there any longer. If a refugee travels back voluntarily, the refugee has ceased to consider their origin country unsafe and so the Ugandan government can stop treating them as refugees. In practice, however, many South Sudanese refugees continue to cross the border without these papers (see Section 7.4.3).

These bureaucratic processes changed in early 2017 when Kiryandongo RS was proclaimed full, and then again after the biometric ‘verification’ took place in May 2018. In that interim period – early 2017 until May 2018 – the formal process to get into the settlement were blocked. Still refugees continued to arrive. This was the source of lucrative and standardized corruption among some street-level OPM officials. New arrivals could effectively buy refugee protection from particular OPM officials. One man from Yambio was put in touch with local representatives of OPM through a family friend. He paid them 1.2 million Ugandan shilling (then 330 USD) to still get his family registered in Kiryandongo RS.⁴¹ Even when refugees joined existing households – something of a grey area – they had to pay. One respondent told me that to ‘add a name to the attestation card’, the applicant would ‘pay for printing’. This fee was around 50,000 UGX per person in late 2017, but rose to 130,000 – 150,000 UGX in early 2018.⁴² This was risky business. One young woman paid 400,000 UGX to get three new people on her attestation card, but ‘The OPM took the money, card and photo. But then they didn’t do anything. They told me ‘there was no reception’ and to come back later!’⁴³ When they worked, such corrupt practices offered a pragmatic, if illegal, ‘win-win’ solution: The OPM official would make some money, and a refugee (household) could settle in the settlement of their choosing. The formal process for resettlement or family unification was slow and cumbersome, and so the informal process was more attractive.

39 The Refugee Act also requires that: ‘A recognised refugee in possession of a valid passport issued by the country of origin shall surrender that passport to the issuing officer before acquiring a travel document’ (Parliament of Uganda, 2006). The origin of this travel document lies in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). Granting refugees the right to such a document was thought to help them travel internationally, because in many instances it would be hard for them to obtain a passport from their country of origin. In Uganda today, however, refugees have to first surrender their passport before they can acquire the travel document.

40 Refugee Act (2006) Article 31 stipulates that that the travel document ‘shall be valid for all countries except the refugee’s country of origin.’

41 Interview with anonymous, Kiryandongo RS, 18 February 2017.

42 Interview with Western Equatorial refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 7 February 2018.

43 Interview with female refugee, Bweyale, 9 March 2018.

7.4.3 Aid distribution, dynamics, and dilemmas: 'Those people with money can beg us for posho!'

Refugees sought to make the most of the refugee regulations and aid distribution they encountered. First, households had to choose between receiving per person per month: 1) 31,000 UGX cash (then 8,50 USD), or 2) a bundle of food items which typically consisted of about 12 kg of maize (unground), 4 kg of beans and some 2 litres of cooking oil.⁴⁴ To many people, the food package was more attractive. Because you could not buy these food items in town for 31,000 UGX. My key respondent Elizabeth in Kiryandongo RS explained why she opted for food aid:

We are 8 people, so we get 90 kg of maize. That's two big bags. We get 12 kg of porridge, although it was not there this month. Then 19 kg of cooking oil, which lasts us 1,5 months. And then 20 kg of beans. Then I first sell 5 kg of beans for 7,500 UGX to send the food to my home with a *boda* [motorcycle taxi]. Then I sell 30 kg of the ungrounded maize. Then I take 50 kg of maize to the machine to grind it into super 'kaunda' flour. That is what we eat in a month. The 10 kg balance maize I leave as back up, to sell in case of problems.⁴⁵

Like many others, Elizabeth felt that the 31,000 UGX per month (= 1,000 UGX per day) would not be sufficient. A simple chapati flatbread already cost 500 UGX. What is more, in this context of poverty people were all too aware how hard it was to save cash money. There were always imminent needs, forcing cash-recipients to make impossible choices. Elizabeth: 'If you get money. If the child is sick, wants shoes, the money is gone! At the end of the month those people with money [aid] can beg us for posho [maize porridge]!'

Initially, most of my friends and respondents opted to receive food aid. But over time, some turned to cash instead. They gave a number of reasons. Some of my respondents had come to Uganda alone. They sometimes found that it was not worth it to sit through the cumbersome distribution process: 'When I calculated all this, the time I was using just to get this little aid. A lot of work! So I thought better to get 31,000 UGX.'⁴⁶ Another key respondent in Kiryandongo RS, explained his calculations:

If you choose to receive food, you have a problem. Because 90 percent of the refugees are women and children ... You get 12 kg of maize per person per month. If you are 16 in the family, you get 3 bags of 50 kg. But you cannot carry that! So the refugees are forced to sell that same maize to hire a *boda* [motorcycle taxi]. Then again you need to sell more maize in order to pay for the grinding. And again,

44 In some refugee settlements in West Nile, refugees were given sorghum or millet instead of maize. Sometimes refugees were given additional food stuffs such as porridge or salt.

45 Interview with Elizabeth, Bweyale, 11 April 2019.

46 Conversation with Isaac, Kampala, 26 June 2019.

to pay for charcoal to do anything with the maize. There is no firewood here because we have no community forest. You may also want to buy salt, because that is only given every 3 months. Now the problem again is that when you sell maize at the distribution, it is very cheap. You get 200 UGX per kilo, even though in town it is 400 UGX per kilo.⁴⁷

So although the amount of food aid was calculated to feed a person the very basics for a month, in practice refugees were forced to sell their aid off at bottom prices in order to transport, grind and cook their food. In this fluid market place, people sought to maximize utility and minimize risk. If they did so well, they could feed the family. But my respondents agreed that the aid was not sufficient to pay for medical bills, school fees or other unexpected costs.

Another choice refugees had to make, was whether to register together as a whole family or in smaller groups. By default, families were registered upon arrival together on a single plot and with a single attestation card. This encouraged children to live with their parents, even beyond the age at which they would move out if they were in South Sudan. In aid-dependent families, children had to obey their parents in order to get their share. My key respondent Charles Bangbe summarized the situation:

In the camp here, the situation is controlled by the economy. Young men here are forced to be with their people because that is where they have their shelter and where they get their food. To their own opinion they might want to move out. But to build your own shelter is expensive, and to get your own food too.⁴⁸

Some youth registered alone or with some age-mates upon arrival. That had some advantages: getting a plot and aid by yourself, and not being so firmly under the authority of the parents. Then again, Charles explained: 'When you cook alone you use more. Especially because you will need to get extra ingredients for the sauce. You have to pool it.'⁴⁹ In South Sudan, youth said, they could make their own money with odd jobs or trade, but in Uganda they found that harder. So aid distribution functioned to keep children living together with parents – even as other factors (such as availability of work and education) were pulling families geographically apart.

Refugee aid distribution often affects household dynamics, often at the disadvantage of (young/junior) women (Lubkemann 2008, 207; Edward 2007). In Uganda, almost the reversed happened: With many households choosing to be 'female-headed' so as to qualify for more aid. Men were expected to go back to South Sudan, largely to work and support their families in the camp (see Chapter 6). When they stayed in the refugee settlement instead, they often

47 Interview with Charles, Western Equatorial refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 11 April 2019.

48 Interview with Charles, Western Equatorial refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 4 August 2017.

49 Interview with Charles, Western Equatorial refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 4 August 2017.

failed to find paid work. And so men felt useless, and some women would now say 'UNHCR is my husband' and accuse their men of not providing anything. This friction sometimes contributed to domestic violence, and motivated some men to return South Sudan (Braak and Kenyi 2018).

7.4.4 Once in Uganda, people continue to move

Many Western Equatorial refugees had the means to move to Uganda, but not to move again after. Even adult children, who in South Sudan would typically move out of the children's *tukul* to construct their own, now remained in the same house with their parents and siblings longer. But others continue to move between refugee settlements and towns, like James' family who first settled in Kampala before moving to Kiryandongo RS.

Somewhat controversially, many South Sudanese people who lived in towns were registered in one of the refugee settlements. Some would come to collect their portion of monthly aid. This was considerably easier for refugees who lived in Bweyale, a 10-minute *boda* ride from Kiryandongo RS, than for those in Arua and Kampala who are much farther from the settlements.⁵⁰ Other town refugees would leave their documents with relatives in the settlement so that they could collect the aid for them, and then send it to town. My key respondent Elizabeth, for instance, had children who studied in Kampala. They were still registered in the settlement on a separate attestation card, and so Elizabeth would collect their aid and send it by *matatu* to Kampala. Some settlement refugees objected to this practice of town refugees, and wondered: 'Why do we get the same amount of aid as those who can afford living in the town?'⁵¹

Some people kept moving within Uganda out of fear. One of my respondents was affiliated with SPLA-IO and survived an abduction attempt in Arua. Then he moved back to opposition-controlled South Sudan. A former Arrow Boy had first moved to a refugee settlement in Uganda, but later settled in town:

A: You know I don't need to be so loud. Government has long hands, longer than mine. They can reach you through the Government of Uganda ...

Bruno: And why are you here in town?

A: I don't want to be so common. When the [South Sudanese] government sends the CIDs [Criminal Investigation Department], they can access you easily in the camp. But here it is very hard. I know how to tell who is who. You know these

50 In West Nile, some refugees also alleged that police would operate road blocks around distribution time to extort refugees coming back to town with their aid.

51 Interview with 58-year-old former chief, Rhino Camp, 13 March 2018.

guys are poorly educated. When people come asking open questions, I get suspicious.⁵²

Fear and paranoia were widespread, especially among people who had been targeted by armed groups in South Sudan, be they state or non-state. They worried over the porous border, the proximity of other South Sudanese, the close links between the South Sudanese and Ugandan governments, and the corruption in Uganda's security services and police. Such fears appeared well-founded. At various points there were cross-border raids by men in South Sudanese military uniforms. In one instance, Ugandan police arrested a South Sudanese man near Yumbe who was allegedly planning: 'to start killing government enemies one by one' (Biryabarema 2017). There was also a frantic side to all this movement, with some youth walking restless 'marathons' around Kampala. A Western Equatorial catholic sister in Kampala explained:

There is too much movement of people up and down, even the urban refugees. We are searching out of fear. We hear the government of South Sudan is looking for some people ... the Government of Uganda may help them ... Fear and mistrust is overpowering us. You may not be open to strangers. People are worried. Be it at home or outside, you may die anywhere. I fear not for my own life but for my relatives here. I call them every morning to see if they are OK.⁵³

Some Western Equatorial refugees in Uganda still travelled back to South Sudan: to trade, work or cultivate, to visit or collect relatives, to maintain their possessions, or to see whether things are improving and the time is ripe to return. Key respondent Elizabeth, for instance, travelled back from her refugee settlement in Uganda to Maridi in South Sudan for Christmas in 2016, and brought 7 children back with her to Uganda. John brought his family from Yambio to a refugee settlement in Uganda, and helped them to complete the registration, find land and build a house. Once his family was established, he returned to his job in Yambio. Now he travels back and forth.

Ugandan refugee authorities typically disapproved of South Sudanese refugees' mobility. By law, a refugee could lose their status for going back to their country of origin.⁵⁴ Movement within Uganda, too, was legally constrained. Technically, refugees had to apply to (representatives of) the Commissioner for Refugees of OPM if they wanted to relocate within the settlement

52 Interview with 29-year-old former combatant from Yambio, Ugandan town, 10 May 2018. Similar sentiments were expressed in Interview with refugee from Darfur, Kiryandongo RS, 8 February 2018.

53 Interview with catholic sister from Yambio, Kampala, 23 March 2017.

54 Article 6 'Cessation of refugee status' of the *Ugandan Refugees Act (2006)* lists among other things that '(1) A person shall cease to be a refugee if— (a) that person voluntarily re-avails himself or herself of the protection of the country of his or her nationality, or voluntarily re-establishes himself or herself in the country of origin'.

or outside of it.⁵⁵ But one OPM Refugee Desk Officer acknowledged that such applications were typically rejected because some settlement areas were getting too full, while others remained underdeveloped:

You know in Ocea [Rhino Camp] it is really getting full. In 2013 there was already a good underwater system. There is the health centre, the police, [and] the Reception Centre. When new people come, they hear those rumours from the old refugees that they shouldn't move to certain areas. But those investments in Ocea were made because the refugees were there. So, if they don't move to other areas or stay there, those places will also not be developed. And yet Ocea is not that fertile, it is sandy.⁵⁶

This was crystal clear. For OPM's vision of development-through-refugees to work, refugees had to stay in less-developed areas. OPM officials also found that refugees' mobility complicates accurate refugee statistics and the food distribution, and ultimately necessitated the 'verification' (see Section 7.6). Some in local government were concerned that 'unregistered refugees' pose a security risk: 'We may not know what they have come with, or what their intentions are. Our local community wants assurance that they are secure living with these people' (Mugerwa 2019).

Beyond such legal, policy, and security concerns, refugees' continued mobility clashed with stereotypical views of refugees as bare victims. As one refugee expert in Kampala saw it: 'People don't like it when refugees are also something else, like traders. Refugees are expected to look and behave a certain way. To be in tatters, diseased, and with an arm hanging.'⁵⁷ There was a discrepancy between this expectation of stereotypically 'deserving' refugees, and the more complex and diverse reality of people who crossed the border.

7.5 LAND ALLOCATION, RESETTLEMENT, AND THE BATTLE FOR PERMANENCE

South Sudanese refugees in Uganda often looked to land as a vital cornerstone for rebuilding their lives in exile. As in post-conflict Western Equatoria, they hoped that land in Uganda would offer stability and autonomy, and a sense of home. Uganda's refugee authorities, meanwhile, had a different and highly ambitious vision of the refugee settlements (see Section 7.2). This is important, because it structured the constraints and opportunities within which refugees rebuilt their lives in exile. Uganda's vision was to use the influx of the refugees to transform marginal rural areas into sites of agricultural self-subsistence and, eventually, surplus production. To make the area governable and productive,

55 Refugees Act (2006) article 30: freedom of movement. Constraints are in articles 44: 2 and 47.

56 Interview with OPM official, Arua, 14 May 2018.

57 Interview with English refugee specialist, Kampala, 30 April 2018.

OPM and UNHCR used ‘masterplans’ – just like the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure had in South Sudan (see Chapter 4). In these plans, the settlements were divided in ‘clusters’ and ‘zones’, where refugees were allocated plots (UNHCR 2016). People were deliberately scattered over the grid so that each household would have sufficient land to cultivate, and all the settlement would be developed.

Uganda’s settlement policy essentially conceived of refugees as landless farmers, and sought to rectify that landlessness temporarily. The plot sizes varied over time, as did ideas about having ‘residential’ and ‘agricultural’ plots in one or separately.⁵⁸ Before the main influx of South Sudanese refugees from July 2016, most settlements would allocate land according to family size: Families of 1-3 got 100 by 100 meter; 4-7 got 200 by 200 meter; and 8 or more got 300 by 300 meter. However, after the post July 2016-influx, settlements reduced the plot sizes allocated to new arrivals: some to 50 by 50 meters, others to 30 by 30 or even 30 by 20 meter.⁵⁹ Some ‘old’ refugees who had larger plots, shared part of their land with new arrivals in a variety of tenure arrangements. In Kiryandongo RS, a survey in 2017 found that 43,7 percent of refugee households lived on plots smaller than 500 square meters, with average households counting 7,8 members (Khadka 2017). This meant that Ugandan settlements were still spacious compared to most refugee camps elsewhere. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Mozambican refugees had an estimated 50 square meters per household (Lubkemann 2008). Still, the new plot sizes were much too small for self-subsistence farming. Across Ugandan settlements, some ‘70 per cent of refugees reported not having sufficient land for cultivation’ (OPM et al. 2020, ix). And this shortages of water and arable land in turn contributed to friction with host communities (International Refugee Rights Initiative 2019, 2). Even in the sprawling settlements, good land was in short supply.

Still, there were some success stories of farming refugees. In Kiryandongo RS I visited David, a 40-year-old church leader, at his home. His compound projected success: It had a fence, a small kiosk in front, and a well inside. The living room walls were adorned with graduation photos and slogans proclaiming religious piety. A TV screened Nigerian gospel music videos (from a USB-drive). All was powered by a solar panel. My research assistants and I were welcomed on a plush green couch, David sat on a single armchair of matching fabric. He told me his story, and how he was trying to make a good living in Uganda. He said proudly:

If we had enough land, we would even feed Juba. I cultivated so much maize that I even sold two sacks to people in Juba. They called me and I put it on a *matatu*

⁵⁸ Presentation by Ugandan OPM official, Arua, 28 February 2018.

⁵⁹ Interview with RWC 1-chairperson, Rhino Camp RS, 18 May 2017.

here. My plan was really to become a commercial farmer, not just subsistence. But the land is not enough. And we have land conflicts.⁶⁰

David's story impressed me, and I asked my research assistants after the interview how he had been able to do so well in these trying circumstances. According to my research assistant, 'He has friends outside, whites. He told me himself.'⁶¹ The story of David – who did well but also received 'support from outside' (an often opaque but significant factor), illustrates well that very few South Sudanese refugees managed to become truly self-reliant. For most refugees, the crops they cultivated (mostly maize, groundnuts and cassava) were a welcome supplement to the still essential aid they received

The assumption that refugees are landless farmers, best helped by scattering them across a sprawling settlement, had adverse consequences. Some refugees were used to urban livelihoods, and not used to farming. My key respondent Elizabeth had lived most of her life in town centres running businesses. Yet when she arrived in Kiryandongo RS, she was allocated a plot in the remote Magamaga area: 'But people were not there and I cannot stay alone.'⁶² She felt isolated, far from neighbours, roads, schools, markets and phone reception. Other refugees also cited security concerns. The few Ugandan police officers in the settlement mostly stayed at the gate (UNHCR 2019b), and apart from petty theft, people told me of child abductions, burglaries and assault.

60 Interview with 40-year-old Zande refugee/church leader, Kiryandongo RS, 9 May 2018.

61 Conversation with research assistant Naomi, Kiryandongo RS, 9 May 2018.

62 Interview with Elizabeth Night, Kiryandongo RS, 15 May 2017.

Figure 12: Interior of a single male refugee's house in Kiryandongo RS. Source: Photo by author, 2017.



Lone refugees were vulnerable to crime. One of my respondents was a young man who had come from Yambio to Kiryandongo RS alone. His house was somewhat isolated, some 100 meters from the nearest murram road and, depending on the season, surrounded by man-high maize. Whenever he would leave his house, for example to collect his aid ration, he would put a padlock on the door. Still, twice the door was forced open, and all his belongings were taken: his mattress, lamp, and clothes. He loaned some money to get back on his feet again, but lost it all when he was lured by a mobile phone scam promising rapid riches. When he could not repay his loans, he 'escaped' back to Juba. Living alone in a remote part of the settlement had made this man vulnerable to theft, ultimately contributing to his return to war-torn South Sudan.

7.5.1 Double allocations, the need to use land to claim it, and Good Samaritans

When refugees were allocated a plot of land at OPM's Reception Centre, they were required to 'develop' it. Failure to do so, OPM reasoned, meant that the land was vacant and could therefore be allocated to someone else. This prin-

ciple chimed with many customary and statutory tenure systems in Africa, but usually in those systems there would be more time. In the settlement, there was haste. Further, back in Western Equatoria, constructing a house would have been the responsibility of a group of men. However, in the settlement people were 'scattered' and 'alone', leaving everyone – including elderly, women, and minors – to their own devices (see Section 7.5.3). And so not all refugees managed to 'develop' their plot quickly enough. Consider for instance the experience of a 29-year-old female refugee in Kiryandongo RS:

I came in January 2017. They gave us a plot in Magamaga, but there some Acholi chased us away. So I went to the camp commander to bring my case. But there the lady chased us away because we had delayed two months to do something on the plot. That time I was pregnant with this one [*she points to the child on her lap*] so I couldn't build. From there I went to the Reception Centre. A lady that I had met before in Juba helped me to stay on her plot. She is staying in Kampala.⁶³

There were a lot of similar stories of people who found their allocated plot occupied. Some had 'developed' it too late, others suspected corruption in OPM. Such land disputes often got emotional or even violent. Consider this 28-year old female refugee:

We went [to our land] but we found that it was the garden of a Ugandan. He was quarrelling with us, saying that he would kill us. I said, 'If it is like that, we better leave – they may kill us just over land.' So we returned to the reception centre. That is where we met a lady from Eastern Equatoria who had been here since 2008. She saw us like this and decided to help us. She even gave our aunt a *tukul* on her own plot.⁶⁴

This was another pattern that emerged from refugees' accounts: Upon finding their allocated plot taken, most people moved away to avoid trouble. Then they unsuccessfully petitioned OPM for new land. I never heard of people taking land cases to Ugandan courts. A good number of refugees were eventually helped with land by South Sudanese or Ugandan acquaintances or strangers. One refugee whose allocated plot was taken lingered for days at OPM's reception centre, hoping for a new plot when she 'spoke to a Ugandan lady who saw me suffering and decided to help me with this place to stay. I don't pay rent. I am here with six children.'⁶⁵ Where state institutions failed, people helped one another.⁶⁶

⁶³ Interview with 29-year-old female refugee from Maridi, Kiryandongo RS, 15 May 2017.

⁶⁴ Interview with 28-year-old female refugee from Yambio, Kiryandongo RS, 15 May 2017.

⁶⁵ Interview with 32-year-old female refugee from Ibba, Kiryandongo RS, 13 May 2017.

⁶⁶ I did not research strangers' motivations for helping refugees. Anecdotally people told me of religion and solidarity, having often also suffered forced migration themselves.

7.5.2 Informal land transactions

There was a lively market for residential and farm land among refugees and host communities. The 2017-survey found that 24 percent of refugees in Kiryandongo RS were renting land from the host community (Khadka 2017). An unclear number also bought land outside the settlement area, including in the cities. When I spoke to South Sudanese who had bought Ugandan urban land, they often said they had bought freehold – despite Uganda’s legal stipulation that refugees (like other foreigners) can only buy land leases, not freehold. In Bweyale town, such residential plots had by March 2018 risen to some 7,000,000 UGX (almost 2000 USD), and so they were only attainable for well-off refugees. Both OPM officials and refugees considered that leaving the settlement meant that, ‘if there is a problem, OPM does not mind about you.’⁶⁷

Trade in settlement land was illegal, as refugees were given use rights (not title) over a plot of land for free. When they did not use the land themselves, it ought to have reverted to OPM. But the formal routes for land acquisition were problematic and slow (see Section 7.5.1), and people kept coming and going so an informal land market sprang up. The value of land in the settlement, rose and fell with the arrival and departure of refugees. One of my respondents recalled how a plot in the settlement used to cost just 300.000 UGX in 2015, but by 2018 had risen up to 1.000.000-2.000.000 UGX.⁶⁸ This volatility offered room for profitable speculation. One Sudanese refugee, Adam, came to Kiryandongo RS in April 2014 when as he recounted: ‘The people were few. There were some [Southern Sudanese and Ugandan] Acholi who had come in 1991, some Kenyans and Congolese, and a few Burundian.’⁶⁹ Although Adam avoided the topic with me, other refugees told me that he was the go-to broker for informal land in the settlement. He was said to have bought dozens of plots from refugees who were leaving in 2014, and to have sold those informally after the July 2016 influx of South Sudanese. John, too, had turned to Adam for land when he arrived in Kiryandongo RS after it was formally closed. John told me how he bought three plots from Adam at 600,000 Ugandan shilling (then 166 USD) per plot (100 by 50 meter). Like with every step of the way from Yambio to the settlement, not every refugee was able to acquire (informal) land in this way.

Beyond ‘buying’ informal land, there were other possibilities of getting access to land. David, the church leader in Kiryandongo RS who I cited earlier as a successful farmer with friends ‘outside’, for instance, had secured access to different plots of farm land in different ways. He explained:

67 Interview with Elizabeth, Bweyale, 9 March 2018.

68 Interview with Elizabeth, Bweyale, 9 March 2018.

69 Adam was not his real name. Interview with Sudanese trader, Kiryandongo RS, 8 February 2018.

I hired that [farm] land from people in the camp. Some I bought, although I cannot call it that. There was this orphan with a lot of land, which he could not cultivate. So I paid his school fees and he gave me his land to dig. But then OPM cancelled that deal saying the land is not ours to trade ... I didn't really buy the land, but I gave a token of appreciation for it in return to become full owner of it. But government owns it, when we go back to South Sudan it is theirs.⁷⁰

Informal land transactions were carefully shielded from OPM for fear of repercussions or extortion. Buyers and sellers shared this interest in secrecy, and transactions were typically not documented on paper. Their precarious tenure situation, made refugees more inclined to compromise when land disputes arose. As David put it: 'We handle those very cautiously, because we don't want things to escalate. We just sit as two parties. We don't want to bring OPM unless it is life threatening ... [If] it is something small, you just give them one or two meters.'⁷¹ In some instances, refugees would involve the refugee authorities (see Chapter 8) to give transactions a certain officiality, without bringing in the state.⁷²

7.5.3 The battle for permanence: Building and bulldozing houses

Once refugees had a plot, they sought to construct shelter. How they did so, became the subject to another heated debate. Upon their arrival, many refugees had received 5 wooden poles and the emblematic UNHCR-tarpaulin of 3 by 6 meter. With this, refugees then erected emergency shelters which would hardly withstand the wind and rain. And so over time many refugees upgraded to more solid grass-thatched mud huts (*tukuls*) of various shapes and sizes – depending on their region of origin and means. Refugees remained uncertain how long they would stay in Uganda, with many referring to the previous long wars (1955-1972, 1983-2005) for reference. And so some refugees built houses with more permanent materials like baked bricks, concrete, and iron roof sheets.

70 Interview with 40-year-old Zande refugee/church leader, Kiryandongo RS, 9 May 2018.

71 Interview with anonymous refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 9 May 2018.

72 In some refugee settlements in southwest Uganda, a camp commandant was allegedly colluding with a refugee businessman to transact land. Interview with English refugee specialist, Kampala, 30 April 2018.

Figure 13: Refugee house with 'permanent' materials in Kiryandongo RS. Source: Photo by author, 2018.



OPM officials argued that refugee settlements ought to be temporary, and that refugees ought not to display 'occupation characteristics, behaving as though it is their land.'⁷³ Although Ugandan law was silent on refugees' use of permanent building materials in the settlements, local OPM officials in various places forbade the practice and urged refugees to use ephemerals materials (clay and half-baked bricks). One refugee desk officer explained:

If you build a permanent house there, it suggests that you have assumed that you can stay there permanently ... The problem is also that when you allow them to build permanent houses, they will start burning bricks. Then they need to gather firewood to fuel it. They may even start commercial brick production. So there is a risk that it leads to environmental damage. The locals also burn bricks, but at least that one we can control.⁷⁴

Refugees objected, saying 'We call this a settlement, not a resettlement camp.' One of my respondents was a lawyer who had worked in land dispute management in Western Equatoria. He was fuming: 'There is nothing like that in the Refugees Act. You know we are already traumatized. And then they are scaring us that they will tear down what cost the little money we had.'⁷⁵ To avoid detection, some refugees built with full-baked bricks but quickly plastered over it before OPM spotted it. This had limited effect. Refugees told me how various OPM officials had threatened to bulldoze refugees' houses, only to accept bribes not to proceed. One refugee in Kiryandongo RS, cited a recent incident:

⁷³ Presentation by Ugandan civil society professional, Arua, 28 February 2018.

⁷⁴ Interview with OPM official, Arua, 14 May 2018.

⁷⁵ Interview with anonymous refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 9 February 2018.

There was the case of [my nephew]. He has gotten some land by bribing OPM for 1,7 million UGX. But then when he started building using good materials, they objected. They said this is not allowed and called him to the office. There they [OPM] demanded he paid 3 million UGX for the building, otherwise they would demolish it.⁷⁶

David, too, had had a visit from OPM officials:

OPM even is threatening to demolish all the houses with permanent materials. [*Laughs and starts talking quickly*] They even came to threaten to demolish this one ... They call it a settlement, but they don't want us to settle. Do they want us to stay under a tree? They came here and spoilt three bags of cement.

Q: I heard of this before. Why does OPM not want you to build with permanent materials? There are two reasons. One, they fear that we may decide not to go home again; and two, there is also a lot of corrupt business, but we shall not talk too much about it. They come here to threaten you in order to make money. You start pleading with them when they threaten to destroy your house, and then you give them some money. When you realize that they are doing this everywhere, they must make a lot. But we don't talk about it, because then we can be victimized.⁷⁷

This book is not an investigation into corruption. But there were countless allegations of such extortionate behaviour by OPM officials towards refugees. And as with mobility, visas, documents and land, better-off refugees were in a better position to engage with street-level bureaucrats in these illicit transactions. They paid the requested bribes so that OPM officials did not enforce their ban on permanent materials, and saved their property from the bulldozer.

It was clear that the street-level bureaucrats in these cases did not act in line with Uganda's refugee laws and policies. They seized the rule-violation not to enforce compliance, but to extort payments. Still, these interactions alluded to a rift in how OPM officials and the refugees saw the settlements. OPM insisted that refugee settlements were of a temporary nature. The local ban on permanent materials and threats to tear down houses, served to freeze refugees' state of precarious liminality: questioning their very right to be in Uganda, and to build towards a better future there.⁷⁸

In defiance of the ban, refugees continued to build new homes with good materials, to plant trees that would take years to grow, and to edify their *tukuls*

⁷⁶ Interview with anonymous refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 7 February 2018.

⁷⁷ Interview with anonymous refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 9 May 2018.

⁷⁸ 'Liminality is a state where an individual moving from one fixed, known status or circumstance into a new one 'becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state.' Turner, 1974: 232, quoted in (Lammers 2006, 295)

with paintings. These practices may be fruitfully analysed as refugees' 'place-making' efforts in a land far from home (Kaiser 2008). Additionally, they were part of a debate with the state about ownership and belonging. These practices also underlined an earlier point: Contrary to land tenure dogma, people may invest (in various forms) in land precisely because they feel tenure insecure (see Chapter 4) (Braak 2016, 22). By building houses, planting trees, or even burying relatives, people sought to solidify their claim to land and belonging.

7.6 EATING AID: THE UNHCR AND OPM CORRUPTION SCANDAL

Corruption ('the abuse of public office for private gain') and allegations of such behaviour were ubiquitous in South Sudan and Uganda. Cultural and societal ideas about 'corruption' are not static, and the practice may be embedded in the co-existence of 'different normative orders' (Anders 2002). Perhaps historically, rule in Uganda was rather personalized (and there may not have been an expectation for it to be otherwise), but over the last decades segments of Ugandan society have struggled for change, and for the enforcement of anti-corruption laws (Nsimambi 1987).⁷⁹ A comprehensive account of corruption in Uganda and efforts to curtail it, is beyond the scope of this section (Baez-Camargo et al. 2017; Flanary and Watt 1999). My focus here is on corrupt practices around the refugee influx, and on one particular governance response to that corruption. The literature on corruption suggests to differentiate levels of corruption (e.g. petty vs 'grand') (Pedersen and Johannsen 2008; Vargas-Hernández 2009). As we will see in this section, the corruption in Uganda's refugee response occurred at various levels, but the response to it focused mostly on fewer than a handful of 'big fish' but a systemic response to petty corruption.

7.6.1 Corruption and fraud in the refugee response

South Sudanese refugees and their Ugandan neighbours committed fraud.⁸⁰ For example, some Ugandans registered in the settlements as refugees so as to receive aid (Charles and O'Byrne 2018). There were also South Sudanese 'recyclers' who registered in different settlements, or on different families' attestation cards 'to get extra rations'.⁸¹ Lastly, there were refugees who returned to South Sudan, but left their ration card with relatives who remained in the Ugandan settlement. In these ways, people would get aid to which they

⁷⁹ Uganda's Anti-Corruption Act (2009) defines corruption in Article 2.

⁸⁰ Fraud understood here as 'Wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain' (Oxford Dictionary, 2017).

⁸¹ Interview with Western Equatorial refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 4 August 2017.

were not entitled. Although the scale of this fraud may have been large, I still consider this petty fraud because the individual scale was small.

Similarly, petty corruption, 'short cuts', and 'kitu kidogo' (Swahili: something small) were common in the interaction between refugees and hosts on the one hand, and state officials on the other. Quite often, the cheapest, quickest and easiest way to deal with state officials was to pay a bribe. This chapter has discussed such allegations of corruptions at every step of the way: the journey, arrival, registration, land acquisition, house construction, and getting 'papers' or opportunities. Effectively, many public services were privately transacted. That my respondents commonly engaged in such corrupt state practices, did not mean that they agreed with them morally: They in fact created the widespread sentiment among refugees that rather than genuinely caring for refugees, some OPM officials and (to a lesser extent) aid workers were exploiting their position for self-interest.

OPM and UNHCR were alleged to be involved also in larger-scale corruption. Similar allegations against OPM had been made in the past (Human Rights Watch 2013). But the major 'corruption scandal' regarding Uganda's refugee response reached Ugandan and international newspapers from February 2018 (Sserungogi et al. 2018). It started in late 2017, when the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) received 'serious allegations' and launched 'internal investigations' against UNHCR (UNHCR 2018c). UNHCR was initially vague about the exact content of allegations – although rumour quickly pointed to mismatches between reported numbers of refugees and actual numbers on the ground. Refugees and hosts were not the only ones trying to game the system: 'In Uganda it seems that it is humanitarian and government workers rather than refugees who are most grossly manipulating the registration process for their own enrichment' (Charles and O'Byrne 2018). That was not all. Uganda's leading newspaper, the Daily Monitor, reported that UN resident coordinator, Ms Rosa Malango, wrote to The Prime Minister, Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, to:

[Draw] attention to incidences of gross mismanagement, fraud and corruption in Ugandan refugees operations and in those allegations, numerous theft of relief items for refugees and misapplication of government land for themselves, allegations of trafficking minor girls and married women to men not of their choice and interference in refugee elections and community leaders by staff of Department of Refugees headed by Mr Apollo Kazungu, the commissioner (for refugees) (Sserungogi 2018).

In late 2018, UN OIOS released a damning audit report on UNHCR and its close if troubled partnership with OPM. The report found that OPM officials had been guilty of all manner misconduct, and that UNHCR officials had been colluding with them (Biryabarema 2018). UNHCR was condemned for 'wast[ing] tens of millions of dollars in Uganda in 2017, overpaying for goods and services, awarding major contracts improperly, and failing to avoid fraud, corruption,

and waste' (Parker 2018). This was about more than the everyday petty corruption and fraud that the refugees and hosts had engaged in.

7.6.2 The response: A biometric verification

The response to the corruption scandal, disproportionately focused on rooting out micro-level corruption around the aid distribution. The priority for UNHCR and OPM was to rebuild donor confidence (Parker 2018). To do so, they conducted a biometric 'verification' of the refugees from March to October 2018. Refugees were required to come to the refugee settlement where they had registered, to have their fingerprints, iris scan and photo taken. This data was then stored in a new system, the Biometric Information Management System (BIMS), which would from then on be used to count numbers of refugees and to verify refugees' identity at the time of aid distribution (Onek, Ecweru, and Boutroue 2018). After the verification was completed, the estimated number of refugees in Uganda was reduced: 'from about 1.4 million to 1.154 million' (Parker 2018). In their joint press release about the verification, OPM, WFP and UNHCR explained this reduction:

Verification exercises conducted in any refugee situation usually result in reductions in numbers. Many factors contribute to these reductions, including movement around the country or beyond, or simply no-shows. In the Ugandan context, these factors played a role. There were also some cases of multiple registrations by refugees at the height of the emergency influxes of South Sudanese refugees between mid-2016 and mid-2017, when registration systems were sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer number and speed of arrivals. These cases were identified and removed from the database (OPM, UNHCR, and WFP 2018).

The focus was very much on the low-level fraud by refugees and hosts around the distribution of aid. In parallel to the verification, the organisations 'rolled out ... ?new food assistance collection procedures ... to mitigate the risk of fraud, ensuring that assistance is well managed and provided only to verified, eligible refugees and asylum-seekers' (OPM, UNHCR, and WFP 2018). What had started as a scandal about the criminal conduct of OPM and UNHCR, was thus seized by them to implement a biometric verification of the refugee population. One does not need to stretch to see an attempt to increase control, and to manage and make more legible a difficult populace with a technology of power (Das and Poole 2004; Scott 1998).

Responses to the larger-scale criminal allegations that the UN OIOS audit report had made (i.e. corrupt procurement, land grabbing, women trafficking) were considerably less energetic. Criminal procedures were started against a handful of OPM officials (Okiror 2020; Sserungogi 2018). The chief suspect, Commissioner for Refugees Apollo Kazungu, was interdicted on corruption related allegations, but he was later reinstated into the same office (The Inde-

pendent 2019). Even if a handful of people had been convicted, that may not have been an adequate solution to the systemic kind of corruption alleged in the OIOS report and in Ugandan media.

7.6.3 Refugee perspectives on the corruption scandal and the verification

I was in Kiryandongo RS at the time that the corruption scandal broke and later when the verification was carried out. It was busy in the settlement and in neighbouring Bweyale. There was almost a festive atmosphere, as South Sudanese people returned from Ugandan towns or even South Sudan to make sure that they were 'verified', so that their relatives could continue to receive their portion of aid. Refugees keenly debated the merits of the allegations and the 'verification' response, and anticipated how it would impact them.

At the time some refugees were hopeful about the verification. My key respondent Elizabeth thought of the verification as a positive step that would help to reduce the number of people in the camp, making it easier for donors to make a proper budget. Some refugees in Kiryandongo RS reasoned that fewer people on the list, would mean that their individual share of the aid would also increase.⁸² Those who had come to Kiryandongo RS after the settlement had been closed or after having first registered elsewhere, hoped they would now be formally registered in Kiryandongo RS. We spoke to a Western Equatorial young woman who ran a small restaurant in the refugee settlement. In between serving her unusually many customers, she told us how she was hopeful about the verification. She had moved before from Rhino Camp to Kiryandongo RS, but still had no ration card. The verification, she hoped, would rectify that situation, and would generally improve the aid distribution and 'equality in the camp'.⁸³

Other refugees held bleaker views of the verification. They essentially saw OPM officials as corrupt rent-seekers 'eating aid' (used to mean various forms of corruption, like embezzlement) that was intended for the refugees. Once the corruption scandal broke, they worried that things might yet get worse: 'Now that the OPM scandal is all over the papers, they are getting nervous. Now anything can happen. They are under investigation and may even be fired. So they hurry to 'eat' things that are intended for the refugees.'⁸⁴

Years later, the outcome of the verification appeared to have been mixed. Those families whose aid had been boosted by recyclers or returnees, had faced a serious reduction after the verification. And fewer refugees on the list, had not translated to increased rations for those who remained. Instead, the rations

82 Sadly, that did not happen as funding shortages meant that rations would be reduced again in response to COVID-19 in late 2020 (WFP 2020).

83 Interview with 35-year old female refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 13 May 2018.

84 Interview with Western Equatorial refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 7 February 2018.

have been periodically reduced, encouraging some refugees to ‘try it again in South Sudan.’⁸⁵ But the fear that OPM officials would ‘eat’ more recklessly after they had come under close scrutiny, appeared not to have come true. Although refugees had much to complain about OPM and UNHCR by early 2019, corruption seemed less of a concern once the verification exercise was completed. Still, many continued to hold the view that government was something often ‘captured by’ or ‘belonging to’ certain people and used for private interests, rather than for the common good – let alone for the interests of the vulnerable.

7.7 CONCLUSIONS: A HIERARCHY OF PLACE AND DISPLACEMENT

This chapter has explored the crucial first phase (half year) after refugees’ arrival in Uganda and Kiryandongo RS in particular, and how refugees’ experiences were mediated by their varying encounters with the Ugandan state bureaucracy. Uganda’s refugee policy has been lauded internationally for being welcoming of refugees, for ‘giving’ refugees land, and for allowing them freedoms which they do not enjoy in other countries (see Section 7.2). Yet this chapter has shown how refugees and the Ugandan refugee administration clashed both when the former desired permanence, and when they desired continued mobility. This chapter has confirmed that mobility remained a crucial life tactic for many refugees, well beyond their arrival in Uganda (O’Byrne and Ogeno 2020). In pursuit of relatives, security, trade or education – or sometimes out of sheer restlessness – people continued to move within and between refugee settlements, towns, and countries. Many South Sudanese Zande households split geographically, to best suit the different needs of their members (see Section 7.4.4). Some of this mobility was allowed by the Ugandan Refugee Act, but discouraged in practice by state officials.

The main state institution charged with ‘refugee management’, OPM, was faced with an unprecedented refugee influx, an ambitious mandate and limited time, money and people. In this context perhaps it is unsurprising that some OPM officials only performed their ‘services’ for refugees who could pay, or that others were accused of a range of corrupt and criminal practices (see Section 7.6). Other OPM officials worked as honestly as possible under these trying circumstances, but typically they, too, prioritized the refugee policy’s utopian vision for the settlements over individual refugee aspirations. This vision was to develop marginal rural areas through the refugee influx. To this end, OPM scattered refugees across sprawling settlements, and directed them to ‘develop’ their plots or lose them. Assuming that refugees would expediently settle on the land allocated to them, OPM did little to resolve land disputes. When refugees were dissatisfied with the plot they were given, they could

85 Email correspondence with anonymous refugee, 14 May 2021.

technically apply for permission to resettle, but OPM officials admitted such requests were rarely granted (see Section 7.4.5). Refugees who arrived in Kiryandongo RS late or who lost their allocated plot were left landless. Local OPM officials also banned refugees from constructing houses with ‘permanent materials’ in the settlements (see Section 7.5.3). In the eyes of OPM, the refugees were being difficult both when they ‘displayed occupation characteristics’ and when they continued to be mobile. The various encounters with the bureaucracy confirmed to refugees that government, in Uganda as in South Sudan, could not be assumed to work in their interests. Confronted with the formal strictures of the refugee policy and rent-seeking OPM bureaucrats, refugees turned to relatives, acquaintances, and kind strangers for help. Others turned to an informal land market in which refugees who were ‘old’ in the settlement, sold land to the ‘young’ ones (see Section 7.5.2). And in the second phase of their stay in Uganda, refugees would set up various governance structures of their own (see Chapter 8).

This chapter and the last have shown how conflict and displacement interact with social mobility. South Sudan’s fragmented wars did not impact all areas or people equally. Local conflict histories and displacement patterns meant that in some communities the benefits of exile could reinforce pre-existing social hierarchies, while it would challenge them elsewhere (Akoi and Pendle 2021). War can have an equalizing influence, with some old South Sudanese elites, too, now ‘back to zero’ (Rift Valley Institute 2016). This chapter has shown the same was true for refugee administration, with old elites now ‘naked like Job’ or ‘surviving on UNHCR’. In the settlement, all refugees received the same monthly 31,000 UGX (8,50 USD) or an equivalent in food. And the former prince and widow were now both subjects to the camp commandants. In some ways, the settlement environment deliberately worked against pre-existing inequalities and hierarchies. Yet there was more aid for female-headed households, and some aid focused on refugees who were categorized as ‘extremely vulnerable’ (a category which a joint OPM-UNHCR report admits is ‘relatively arbitrary’) (OPM et al. 2020). The Ugandan refugee policy also fit better for refugees who wanted to farm for survival, than for those more accustomed to leadership roles and/or urban lives and livelihoods.

Generally, it appears that for the Western Equatorial Zande, social hierarchies were reinforced by conflict, displacement, and return. Both leaving Western Equatoria (see Chapter 6) and arriving in Uganda (see Chapter 7) were shaped by, and in turn shaped, a hierarchy of displacement: from the ‘involuntary immobile’ and internally displaced people unable to leave Western Equatoria, to the diasporic elite in rich countries (see Section 3.4). Wealthy and/or well-connected families, faced fewer risks during the journey, could choose a suitable settlement or town in Uganda (see Section 7.4.1), could better overcome the obstacles posed by street-level bureaucrats (see Sections 7.4 and 7.5), and send their children to good schools. Those children may in the future have better chances of finding work back in South Sudan – as suggested by

earlier returns (see Chapter 4 and 5) – even while their families may remain ‘outside’ in Uganda or the West (see Section 7.4.4). On the flipside: stayees and refugees sometimes saw mobility – to the city, to Uganda, ‘outside’ – as a Faustian bargain: You may find education, safety and prosperity, but risk becoming alienated from the social and cultural knowledge associated with (often rural) ‘home’. The proximity of difference made many Zande in Uganda nostalgic for the sense of community that they recalled or imagined from ‘home’. All Zande I met in Uganda said they wanted to return to South Sudan eventually, saying ‘You have no inheritance in a foreign land.’ These processes of alienation and the (re)construction of cultural order will take centre stage in the next chapter.

Western Equatorian refugees in Uganda strove to keep the long view of their predicament, and to situate it in the long history of ruptures (see Chapter 2) and movements (see Chapter 3). They knew that by aggregate, the countless dilemmas posed to them throughout conflict and displacement would affect societal change and social mobility. This awareness informed their ideas about the meaning of displacement, their future hopes, and present tactics. Their ‘running’ and arrival were in first instance reactive to conflict, but often also informed by agentic, aspirational, and future-oriented motives.