Refugee Mobility and Uncertain Lives: Challenges and Agency of South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda

Isao Murahashi

African Studies Center - Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan

Abstract

Mobility is essential for improving the standard of living and enhancing food security, particularly for displaced people. For those living in the conflict-ridden areas of Africa, border crossings and onwards movement are commonplace, which complicates simplistic ideas about displacement and return. This paper examines the mobility of the South Sudanese people who crossed the South Sudan-Uganda border. It highlights historical cross-border mobility and the current situation for refugees in Uganda. Since the mid-1950s, when the first South Sudanese took refuge in Uganda, both the Ugandans and South Sudanese repeatedly crossed the shared border to escape civil wars. Currently, most of the South Sudanese, who fled the recent conflict in South Sudan, remain in Uganda despite the peace agreement of 2018. They seek an opportunity to return. South Sudanese in exile have continually been exposed to uncertain futures. Uganda, which has the largest number of refugees in Africa, prioritises the repatriation of refugees. Here, we present a case study of mid-western Uganda. I present the experiences of multiple refugee displacements. I discuss the agency of refugees, discuss how they employ mobility for a secure life, and whether they decide to settle among the local population in Uganda or return home.

Keywords: refugee mobility, border crossing, civil war, South Sudanese, Uganda

1. Introduction

1.1. Aim: Human mobility in conflict-ridden areas

At the end of 2020, the data of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) showed that 82.4 million people were forcefully displaced worldwide, including 26.4 million refugees and 48.0 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR 2021a). The number of forced migrants has almost doubled since 2010, though the mobility of displacement has been restricted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For refugee issues seen as a global crisis, the UNHCR is mandated to seek long-lasting solutions, *viz.*, 1) local integration in neighbouring countries, 2) resettlement and permanent asylum in a third country, and 3) voluntary repatriation to the country of origin. Of these, voluntary repatriation is considered the most appropriate solution only if the home country is peaceful and secure (Yonekawa 2020: viii).

This view is grounded on the assumption that most refugees who fled conflicts will take refuge in refugee camps. There, the UNHCR will provide relief, food items, and basic services with NGOs. Refugees will eventually want to return home. Repatriation to the home country is regarded as a voluntary return, ending 'the refugee cycle' — both breaking the cycle of violence, persecution and flight, and the completion of the cycle for those able to return to their homes (Koser and Black 1999). In that sense, repatriation is seen as an unproblematic and sustainable solution to displacement by the UNHCR and the international community. Despite multiple cases of 'official' repatriation in the last three decades[1], little is known about refugees who experienced multiple displacements, the later movements of those who returned home, or the onwards movements of those who rejected repatriation. Furthermore, given the repeated conflicts in some parts of Africa, the regional cross-border movements of local people are more multifarious and diverse than the linear trajectory of the 'refugee cycle'. They disrupt simplistic ideas of return and repatriation.

As Long and Crisp (2010) indicated, there is growing recognition in the UNHCR that refugee mobility is a positive asset that can contribute to their lasting protection. This is reflected by many academic reports indicating that the home country of forced migrants is often not a desirable place to return to, given its chronic insecurity, food insecurity, and a lack of basic services and livelihood means. Meanwhile, it is recognised that mobility and transnational networks often constitute effective strategies among the protracted refugee population. Even though secondary movements (also called the onwards movement — which refers to refugees moving independently from the first host country to a third country[2]), are seen strictly of concern to the international refugee regime (Scalettaris 2009: 58). However, the changing attitude of the UNHCR to refugee mobility has not been embraced by the

[1] In the 1990s, known as the 'decades of voluntary repatriation', on average, 1.5 million refugees were able to return home each year.
[2] Onward movement includes movements of the migrants who do not have official travel permits such as visas. They are often called undocumented migrants.

international community. Displacement solutions have focused on containing or reversing the movement of migrants, rather than on restoring the lost rights which prompted flight (Long and Crisp 2010: 56).

This paper scrutinises the mobility of the South Sudanese, focusing on historical cross-border mobility in wartime and the current protracted situation for refugees in Uganda. Here, I discuss refugee experiences in multiple displacements and movements, revealing what it means to be a 'refugee' in Uganda, when and why a 'refugee' refugee decides to remain or return in uncertain social conditions, and how they employ mobility to seek better lives or respond to various demands from their families. In line with recent issues, such as the protracted refugee situation and Covid-19, I discuss the complex realities of the displacement and return of the South Sudanese, and interrogate simplistic ideas about repatriation based on binary views about home and away.

1.2. Background, methods, and location

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees in Africa. This can be traced back to the 1940s, when under British colonial rule the Polish refugees were hosted in two settlements (Lingelbach 2020). In 1955, tens of thousands of refugees who fled southern Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian condominium arrived in northern Uganda. In addition, after the 'Social Revolution' of 1959, more refugees came from Rwanda into southwestern Uganda. Since its independence in 1962, Uganda has been an epicentre for refugees, being a favourable destination for those who escaped from conflict-prone African countries, including Sudan/South Sudan[3], Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, and Burundi (Figure 1).

Today, Uganda is the top refugee-hosting state in Africa. At the end of 2020, Uganda hosted approximately 1.4 million refugees (UNHCR 2021a). Moreover, Uganda generated refugees in the late 1970s and witnessed almost two million IDPs in the 1990s when the government of Uganda fought against the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the northern region. Prolonged insecurity in the region means that Uganda has hosted a considerable number of refugees for several decades, many of whom have stayed for protracted periods.

This paper focusses on the refugee-hosting areas in mid-western Uganda. Each refugee-hosting area has its distinct history and characteristics[4] (Figure 2). For this study, I collected the data through a survey and participant observation during fieldwork. Three districts which consist of the former Masindi District, *viz*., Kiryandongo, Buliisa, and Masindi in the Bunyoro sub-region, have hosted refugees for

[3] South Sudan seceded from Sudan to become a sovereign state in July 2011, after a twenty-two-year civil war. In this paper, the name of southern Sudan is used for the time period before independence, while South Sudan refers to the state after its secession from the north, namely present-day Sudan. South Sudan almost corresponds with southern Sudan in terms of geographical location.
[4] Apart from mid-western Uganda, West Nile Sub-region – north-western Uganda and the south-western region are also major refugee hosting areas.

decades. The Masindi settlement (1942–1948) in Buliisa District was the first refugee settlement in Uganda. It hosted the Polish refugees. In the 1960s, Kigumba in Kiryandongo District saw an increase in population, due to the influx of labour migrants from Kenya and self-settled Sudanese who escaped the escalating intensity of the civil war[5] (Charsley 1974). I interviewed a South Sudanese man whose family members had been in exile in Uganda; he came to Japan as an international student. In 2021, I paid a short visit to a family member who remained in a village in the Buliisa District.

I most often visited the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement (KRS) in the Kiryandongo District for research. The KRS was established to host Sudanese refugees who escaped from the East Bank of Sudan in 1989. Since 1991, most of the refugees hosted in the KRS have been South Sudanese, except in 2007 and 2013. As of 2021, the total population of the KRS is estimated to be over 72,000 (UNHCR 2021b), while Bweyale has approximately 31,000 (UBOS 2014)[6]. My initial fieldwork for South Sudanese refugees began in August 2014 in the KRS, about half a year after the South Sudanese conflict broke out in Juba and the north-eastern parts of South Sudan. Since then, I have collected data whenever I visited KRS intermittently between 2015 and 2021. In most cases in the KRS and its adjacent Ugandan town, Bweyale, using semi-structured interviews – sitting, chatting, eating and drinking together with interlocutors in KRS.

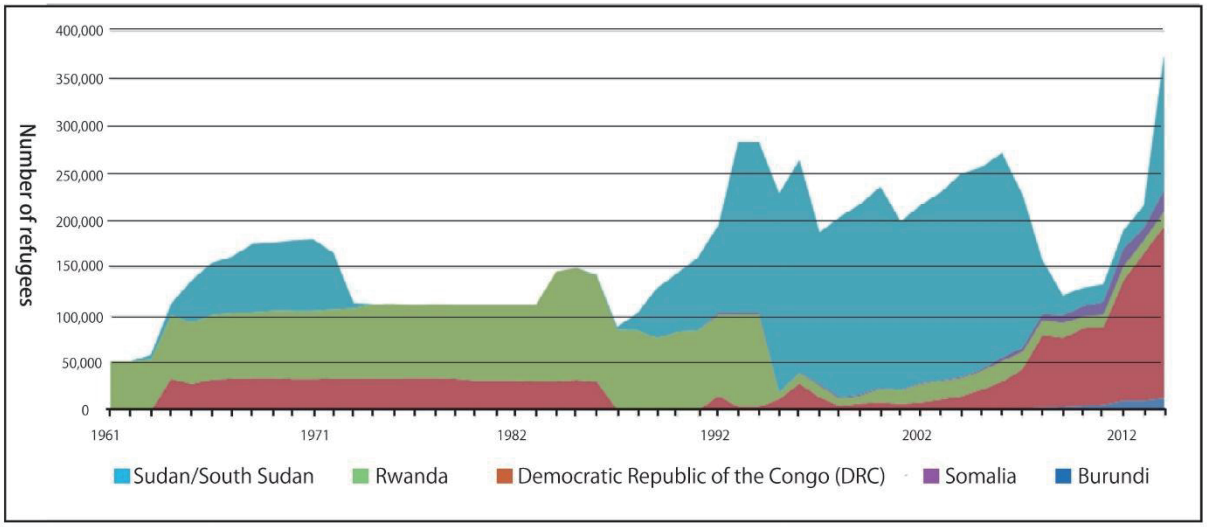


Figure 1. Refugee flows of 1961–2014 in Uganda

Source: Crawford *et al.* (2015).

Note: This figure is based on the number supplied by the UNHCR consultant.

[5] Self-settled refugees refer to the forced migrants who are not encamped, intentionally or accidentally, in the official refugee camps or settlements established and recognised by the refugee-hosting states and the UNHCR.
[6] The refugee number that the UNHCR publishes represents those who register with the organisation in the KRS. The actual population of the settlement may be less, considering that many South Sudanese refugees are practically living in Bweyale.

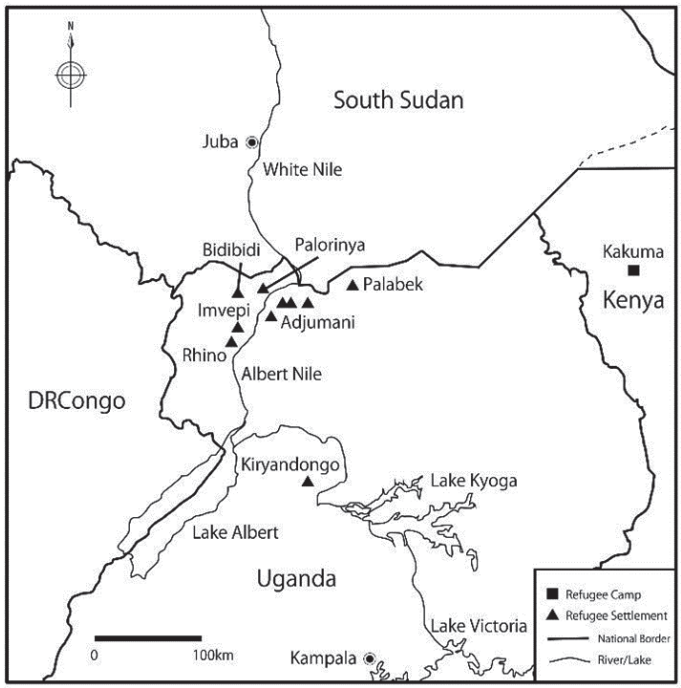


Figure 2. Map of the research area and refugee settlements in Uganda

Source: UNHCR (2021b).

2. History of wartime migration

2.1. Initial wave of Sudanese 'refugees'

In the 1960s, the number of Sudanese refugees increased when the fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the southern rebels, known as *Anya-nya,* raged. This was the first wave of refugees from southern Sudan to Uganda. By the end of the First Sudanese Civil War in 1972, the Sudanese government estimated that 500,000 people had hidden in the bush, and another 180,000 had crossed into neighbouring countries, with 74,000 settling in several official camps including Onigo, Agago, Acholi-pii, and Nakapiripirit, among others (Moro 2019). Refugees mostly came from areas contiguous with the Ugandan border. They included various ethnic groups such as the Bari-speaking people[7], Lotuho-speaking people[8], Madi and Acholi. In some cases, they had co-ethnic Ugandan hosts, such as Kakwa, Acholi, and Madi.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, more than half of the displaced Sudanese were self-settled in a group in other parts of Uganda. Some stayed together with their Ugandan relatives and friends, using already established transnational networks. Others took refuge in official camps, seeking educational opportunities.

[7] Bari speakers include Bari, Kuku, Nyepu, Kakwa, Pojulu and others, living in both banks of the Nile.
[8] Lotuho speakers include the multiple ethnic groups, such as Lotuho, Lokoya, Lango and Lopit, living on the east bank of the Nile.

2.2. Informal self-settlement: Experience of uncertain journeys

Here, I describe the experience of the family of sons of displaced Sudanese, taking their journey and settlement in Uganda as an example. All individual names shown in this paper are pseudonyms so that no individuals can be identified.

Jacob was born in Nyabyeya village, close to the former Masindi settlement which hosted Polish refugees. His grandfather, who joined the rebels as a fighter, fled home with his wife in the late 1960s, when he was targeted for killing by the Sudanese army. They first settled in Kigumba, where Kenyan migrants had already settled. At that time, they did not receive official support from the government or NGOs. Therefore, they had to look for jobs as wage labourers.

Jacob narrates the experience of his family as below[9]:

> When they arrived at the time, they were not helped as 'refugees'. They did not receive any assistance. Life was very hard, but the industrialisation of Uganda facilitated displaced people to have started looking for jobs. Some of my grandfather's colleagues went to Kakira, where there was a sugar factory[10]. My grandfather and colleagues were factory labourers. They travelled to and between Kakira and Kigumba. My father was born in 1970 in Kigumba as a son of [a] Sudanese 'refugee'. Kigumba was like an informal settlement, and Arabic was commonly spoken.
>
> In the late 1980s, after the Kakira sugar factory stopped operating, my grandfather left for the Budongo Forest[11] in Masindi, where the timber industry was operated in a sawmill factory. In Masindi, the Kinyara sugar factory[12] was also operated. They decided to look for jobs in sugar or sawmill factories. They moved with their families to Nyabyeya, located 40 km west of Kigumba. The Sudanese Nyepu[13] people self-settled in the village, where the Polish refugees left.
>
> Over several generations, they have not been recognised as Ugandans. My family members were all born and have lived, including me, but not seen as refugees or Ugandans. My grandfather, and later on, my father told us that we have been temporarily staying in Uganda, and must go back [to] Sudan as peace comes to there.

[9] This narrative is based on my interview with Jacob held in the winter of 2020.
[10] The Kakira Sugar factory was constructed in the 1940s by the Kakira Sugar Works Limited, which was set up by Muljibhai Madhvani, who was of Indian origin, and continued to operate till the 1970s, when the Madhvani family was expelled from Uganda by the erstwhile Ugandan president, Idi Amin.
[11] The Budongo Forest is located close to Lake Albert. It has abundant tropical rain forests and wild chimpanzees.
[12] The Kinyara sugar factory dates to a jaggery factory constructed in the 1950's by Kinyara Sugar Works Limited. Since then, Kinyara Sugar Works Limited has been the second largest sugar producer in Uganda.
[13] The Nyepu is the ethnic community in the southern Sudan. They are sometimes recognised as a splinter population of the Kuku, but the Nyepu claim their own ethnic identity.

> At the time of the signing of CPA[14], the Sudanese in Nyabyeya gathered together, and we are performing traditional dances for celebration. I then started returning to Sudan.

His narrative about their family's experience of displacement and dispersal, shows how the Sudanese in Uganda try to seek employment without official support from the UNHCR. They are considered foreigners, not refugees or Ugandan nationals, by Ugandan host communities. As Moro (2019), who was once displaced with his family in Uganda[15], points out, the Sudanese who were not encamped in the official refugee settlements in the 1960s and 70s acquired land with their earnings and became poll taxpayers in Uganda, thereby shifting their place of residence. Some settled in Gulu, the largest town in northern Uganda, while others went southwards to settle in Kigumba and Bweyale in the mid-west. In these towns, Ugandans of Indian origin operated cotton ginning mills or other businesses and employed them as casual labourers. In Kigumba, a group of Sudanese people began to settle as migrant labourers under a government-led settlement scheme launched in 1957[16]. While their numbers increased greatly in the mid and late 1960s due to the upheavals in southern Sudan, it was without any official sponsorship or organisation (Charsley 1974: 342). They have settled, widely recognised as a distinct group under an ethnic label of 'Sudani,' among the heterogeneous peoples, including native Nyoro, Kenyan and Ugandan migrant workers (ibid. 347). Although many displaced Sudanese were free to move in Uganda, they were vulnerable to exploitation and harassment, and their lives were hard due to a lack of citizenship (Moro 2019).

In 1972, with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement, the First Sudanese Civil War, which cost an estimated one million lives, came to end. The Repatriation and Resettlement Commission was established to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of refugees, supported by the governments of Sudan and Uganda. The UNHCR also coordinated the official repatriation program with the provision of food, shelter and transportation to returnees. According to the Commission's report in 1974, half the Sudanese 'refugees'[17] had settled 'spontaneously' among the local population in the country of asylum. The largest group of self-settled refugees was in Uganda (63 per cent), followed by Zaire and Ethiopia (Akol 1994: 81).

---

[14] The CPA (Comprehensive Peace Agreement) was signed between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in January 2005 in Naivasha in Kenya, ending the twenty-two-year Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005).

[15] Leben's family were settled near Gulu, the largest town in northern Uganda, among a host community of Ugandan Acholi. The ethnic group of the Nyepu, that Jacob hails from, is now considered part of the Kuku, that Leben Moro came from.

[16] The Kigumba Settlement Scheme was launched during from 1957–1962 to encourage agriculture. It was not obvious where suitable settlers could be acquired from, and about twenty plots were allocated to Sudanese, selected from those already at Kigumba. Three months later a Mulugoli, a member of one of the Luyia tribes (the Maragoli) from western Kenya, who was working at Masindi as a railways clerk, heard of the scheme (Charsley 1968: 17).

[17] In the Commission's report, all persons directly and indirectly affected by the conflict were included and defined as 'refugees', broadening the OAU definition of refugees to meet the specific needs of the refugees and IDPs.

At an early stage, this official repatriation operation faced many challenges that were contrary to the Commission's optimistic expectations, partly because many refugees were reluctant to return home. Like Jacob's family, several Sudanese remained in Uganda and settled informally among the local population, after the official repatriation operation ended in 1974[18]. The 'voluntary' repatriation of refugees was influenced by several factors: 1) the way refugees had been settled during their exile, 2) the first impression of the early returnees of the general situation in southern Sudan, and 3) the level of socio-economic development that 'refugees' had achieved while in exile (ibid. 84). In the 1970s, relatively self-sufficient and affluent Sudanese, who chose to self-settle, tended to remain in Uganda until the fall of Idi Amin of 1979, while those living in poverty were more ready to return home.

In terms of mobility, the main characteristic of the Sudanese in Uganda during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972) was that they were able to exploit a transnational network, based on the links of kinship and friendship, which had been established during the colonial era through trade and seasonal labour. They preferred self-settling to being accommodated in camps. Even though they enjoyed the freedom of movement to seek informal employment, and were incorporated informally into the heterogeneous community of multiple ethnicities without overt segregation in mid-western Uganda, their lives were hard and precarious, due to the lack of citizenship and their refugee status.

3. Encampment policy and its effect on refugee mobility

3.1. Second wave of Sudanese refugees: Establishment of the KRS

The relatively peaceful time did not last long in southern Sudan. In 1983, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) was organised to wage an armed struggle against the government of Sudan (the Second Sudanese Civil War). The civil war was so brutal and prolonged that it had a disastrous impact on the civilians, who suffered disease, displacement, famine and impoverishment. At least 1.5 million people were killed, over four million were displaced internally, and hundreds of thousands more were displaced to neighbouring countries by the time the CPA was signed in 2005. Most Sudanese refugees experienced protracted refugee conditions, until mass repatriation began in the mid-2000s.

They arrived in Uganda in large numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially in the aftermath of internal divisions in the SPLM/A. The new wave of refugees received generous assistance from the UNHCR and the government of Uganda, whose policy was to confine refugees in camps and dedicated areas called 'refugee settlements'. Effectively, the policy redefined a refugee as 'someone receiving assistance and living in a camp' (Kaiser 2006a: 605, Moro 2019). Since they were presumed to be supporters of the SPLM/A, a close ally of Uganda's governing National Resistance Movement (NRM),

[18] In Uganda and Zaire, 6 per cent of total 'refugees' refused to return home, while about 70 per cent were officially repatriated and the rest are believed to have returned home independently, without support by the UNHCR, or to have remained in the country of asylum without registering for a repatriation programme.

no obstacles were put in the way of refugees seeking entry to Uganda and they were granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis, obviating the need for individual status determination procedures (Kaiser 2008: 255). During this period, large refugee settlements were established to host approximately 200,000 Sudanese refugees in the West Nile (Arua and Moyo District)[19] and mid-western Uganda (Masindi District).

The KRS is one of these refugee settlements. It dates back to the Ugandan government and the UNHCR's establishment of a transit centre to host about 14,000 Sudanese refugees, who fled Eastern Equatoria in southern Sudan after an attack by the SPLA on Torit and the border towns in 1989. While this group arrived in Uganda from various areas of Sudan, the majority were Sudanese Acholi. Those who crossed the border were hosted in a transit camp in the Kitgum District of northern Uganda. Shortly after they arrived, they were harassed by the LRA rebels. In 1990, the Ugandan government granted the land in the Masindi District for use by refugees and set up a transit centre to fulfil the UNHCR's request that the Sudanese refugees be transferred to a safer location. In 1991, the government of Uganda and the UNHCR formalised the establishment of the KRS and allocated land to refugees the next year. Each refugee family, due to the lack of citizenship and their refugee status, was allocated a plot of land in proportion to the number of family members (Mulumba 2010: 192)[20].

In the 1960s, many Sudanese Acholi who fled to Uganda, opted to self-settle among Ugandan communities where they had links of family and friendship. However, in the late 1980s, many Sudanese refugees had little choice but to be accommodated in the official camps or settlements, owing to insecurity and distrust among the people in northern Uganda. Since the 1980s, the official settlement policy has been more thoroughly enforced by the Ugandan government in the context of regional insurgencies. According to Kaiser (2000a), this was partly because the Ugandan government was prompted to monitor the Sudanese refugee situation via its network of Local Councils (LCs)[21], due to their suspicion that the Sudanese government supported the Ugandan rebel activities of the LRA. Furthermore, Ugandan Acholi also feared repercussions from the Ugandan government or the LRA if they absorb their Sundanese relatives into their communities (Kaiser 2000a: 39).

3.2. Refugee mobility in the protracted situations: The case of KRS

Kaiser (2006a: 598) pointed out that states prefer the encampment of refugees for the following reasons: they offer visibility (which helps with claims for burden-sharing), they offer mechanisms for containment and control (which help mitigate any perceived security threats in the short term), and they

[19] Adjumani District was created in 1997 when the eastern part of Moyo District split off in 1997. Yumbe District was established in 2006, when Aringa County was split off Arua District. At present, these two districts host the largest number of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda.
[20] 1.2 hectares to 1.4 hectares of land was provided to Sudanese refugees in KRS.
[21] The local government system of LCs was introduced by the government of Uganda in the 1990s for decentralisation of power.

reduce the risk that the refugee populations will coalesce into the host population, thereby failing to repatriate when conditions change in their home country. In Uganda, the state's preference for the encampment policy was supported, if not actively encouraged, by the UNHCR.

For the government of Uganda and the UNHCR, there were several reasons the encampment policy was seen as a feasible solution. First, it was necessary to protect Sudanese refugees physically from unstable security situations in northern Uganda, where there was a risk that refugees would be targeted by rebels like the LRA. For the Ugandan government, the location of refugee settlement in remote, politically marginalised border areas meant that it could keep security risks at a distance. Second, the UNHCR and its NGOs can provide relief operations, such as food assistance and service delivery, more promptly and effectively to the 'settlement refugees' – the recognised beneficiaries. Third, the government of Uganda and the UNHCR seemingly prioritised the 'voluntary' repatriation of refugees to Sudan over local integration in Uganda, among the permanent solutions. Refugee encampments reflect the desire to maintain separate refugee populations, thereby preventing them from merging into local Ugandan communities and instead facilitating 'voluntary' repatriation.

In the Ugandan settlement system, refugees were required to stay on plots allocated by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). They were also encouraged to practice agriculture to produce substantial crops for self-consumption and a surplus of cash crops for selling. They were expected to earn a living over the years through agricultural production and other income-generating activities, under the Ugandan refugee policy, which was aimed at achieving refugee self-sufficiency and integration of services for refugee settlements and refugee-hosting areas. This policy led to the introduction of the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) for refugees, launched in the West Nile in 1999. The SRS was enthusiastically welcomed by the UNHCR and NGOs. For the UNHCR and international donors, the objective of the SRS was to create a situation where refugees no longer needed direct assistance to meet their immediate and wider needs, in their country of asylum.

In the KRS in the mid-1990s, the UNHCR and its implementing partners withdrew their relief from the settlements and sought to 'hand over' responsibility for them to the Ugandan government (Kaiser 2000b). A partial explanation is the UNHCR saw that many refugees in the KRS produced enough maize to achieve self-sufficiency, and the KRS was the only settlement for Sudanese refugees in Uganda that had never experienced any insecurity. However, the UNHCR's withdrawal faced strong opposition from Sudanese refugees as well as the local hosts. The former were worried about the degradation of basic services in the settlement, while the latter feared it would lead to competition with refugees for resources. The UNHCR's withdrawal from the KRS triggered discussion over the responsibility between the UNHCR and the government of Uganda; it generated tension between the two parties, as well as between

the refugees and their hosts[22].

In fact, during the late 1990s and the early 2000s, there was no significant improvement in food security and livelihoods among Sudanese refugees, although the situation varied between refugee settlements. In some settlements, land quality was poor and the allocated plots for farming were far from local markets. Even during the 2000s, Sudanese refugees in the KRS were unable to generate enough produce to meet their basic needs and fund necessities such as health care, education, and non-food items (Kaiser 2007). Years after the plots were allocated, the increase in population led to added pressure on the land, which was already exhausted from repeated use (ibid. 222). Some inhabitants continued to receive a proportion of the full food ration, but food rations were phased out for many of them. Furthermore, some families had unregistered relatives who received no food aid, either because they failed to negotiate the bureaucratic system properly, or because they had transferred illegally from another settlement (ibid. 223).

Sudanese refugees' livelihood strategies were negatively affected by legal restrictions on their movements. They were required to obtain travel permits issued by the OPM[23] when they left the settlement in which they were registered. Not only were refugees unable to choose where they wished to live, but they were also not allowed to take up opportunities to access available fertile land outside the settlements. Nor could they move freely to access other employment opportunities and engage in business activities (ibid. 223).

Despite such constraints on mobility, refugees sought ways to generate income to make a living for themselves and their families. The most common was to sell agricultural products to local traders and middlemen. In the KRS and its neighbouring local communities, maize was the main crop for daily food and cash. In the KRS, traders entered the settlement with trucks at harvest time and bought at relatively low prices (Murahashi 2021: 266). Some refugees were able to establish themselves as vegetable farmers as well as petty traders within settlements or in the local Ugandan market. They sometimes travelled outside settlements to sell their agricultural produce without travel permits. Local Ugandans gathered around the settlement to get access to health and educational services, both inside and outside the settlements. Bweyale Town, the Ugandan host community adjacent to the KRS developed and attracted various informal business activities in the 2000s (Murahashi 2021). It has more than doubled in size since the arrival of Sudanese refugees and significant numbers of Ugandan IDPs, who fled the LRA's attack on civilians in northern Uganda.

The same situation was also seen in remote refugee settlements close to the border areas, where economic activities and the population around the settlements increased notably. Refugees with business

[22] This discussion between the UNHCR and the government of Uganda led to the SRS in 1999.
[23] The OPM is the refugee affairs authority of the government of Uganda. It has centralised control and management over all refugees and asylum seekers in the refugee settlements and Kampala.

interests, professionals such as schoolteachers, and other people with non-agricultural professions desired to remain in urban settings to pursue their livelihoods. The cross-border movement between Uganda and Sudan was facilitated by self-settling in urban settings outside the settlements. Some refugees left the settlements for a few weeks or a month to get casual work, called *lejaleja* in Kiswahili, or to receive schooling in distant towns.

Kaiser (2007: 223) describes those refugees who left the settlement, temporarily or for a relatively long time, as 'moving up and down looking for money' in various ways, and they drew on a range of resources to do so. Consequently, Sudanese refugees preferred to move out of settlements, to improve their livelihoods through casual labour and trade, if they could afford to do so. However, Ugandan refugees moved to settle in areas close to a settlement, so that they could get involved in work and have access to the various services provided by the settlement, such as schools and health centres. Some refugees married local Ugandans and were integrated into their communities. Others divided their family members into settlements and outside locations.

In 2005, when the CPA was signed to end twenty years of civil war, residents of the KRS welcomed it, though they had been relatively slow to register for voluntary repatriation (Kaiser 2006b: 72). Many refugees wondered if their homes would see infrastructural and developmental progress before returning to the areas devastated by the prolonged war. Most of the KRS Sudanese returned to South Sudan by 2010, while approximately 10 per cent of residents remained in the KRS for reasons such as overseeing the continuing education of students and looking after aged parents and vulnerable groups. These families opted to divide family members between the settlement and their home country. For example, one of my interlocutors, Sarah, fled a village called Pajok[24] near the border in 1990 at age ten. She was raised and educated in the KRS and married an Acholi refugee. Her husband returned to Juba to seek work, rather than the rural village, after the CPA was signed in 2005. She chose to remain in the settlement, for the sake of her children's education and to care for her elderly father. Her relationship with her husband worsened after he married another woman in Juba. Her father, elder brother and elder sister lived in the settlement. She managed to make ends meet without her husband's support.

4. Recent waves of South Sudanese refugees

4.1. Recent waves of South Sudanese refugees and the 'new' refugee policy

After the end of the Second Sudanese Civil War in 2005, movement across the South Sudan-Uganda border became commonplace and much easier, until fresh conflicts began to affect the border regions. In 2011, South Sudan's secession from Sudan was largely supported and welcomed by the South Sudanese. Only two years later, however, the world's newest country lapsed into a civil war. This war

[24] Pajok is a village on the Ugandan border where most of the KRS's Acholi residents hail from. They escaped the arrival of the SPLA, after it attacked the military barracks of the Sudanese army near the village in 1989.

was so brutal, devastating, and fragmented that by mid-2016, South Sudan was Africa's greatest refugee crisis. Both soldiers and civilians were targeted for killing and looting by government forces and opposition on an ethnic basis. Uganda hosted 970,000 South Sudanese refugees (62 per cent of all Ugandan refugees) (UNHCR 2021b).

In 2006, the Ugandan government renewed its legal policy for refugees with the enactment of the Refugees Act, followed by the 2010 Refugee Regulations, by which refugees and asylum seekers were entitled to have relative freedom of movement with permission to leave and return to their designated settlements, and to work and access Ugandan social services, including education and health systems. The new Ugandan refugee laws were praised by the international community and UN agencies as a progressive and open-door policy.

After the new influx of South Sudanese refugees, Uganda launched a response scheme called the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) Strategic Framework, aiming at bringing together a wide range of stakeholders to more effectively promote the resilience and self-reliance of the entire population of refugee-hosting areas. As with the local settlement policy, the Ugandan government allocated refugees land for farming and residence within a settlement, to supplement food rations.

4.2. Uncertain lives in exile and fragile peace at home

Despite such a new and progressive approach to refugee response, it has been argued that there is a gap between the goals and practices. Several disadvantages have recently been noted, owing to the vast number of refugees as well as a major corruption scandal. First, land issues in the settlement became more serious. Due to the increasing number of refugees, the land given to refugees in the settlements was so small that it was almost impossible to maintain a self-sustaining life. By 2017, a plot of land only 30 × 30 m was allocated to each refugee family in any settlement in northern and mid-western Uganda, including the KRS.

The lack of land forced refugees to demand monthly food rations. However, the World Food Programme (WFP) has been forced to cut the amount of grain (sorghum or maize) in food rations due to severe funding shortages. It also frequently fails to distribute food regularly because of the poor delivery system.

In addition, refugees were often harassed by the corruption that some Ugandan officials and UNHCR staff are suspected of. Refugees are asked to pay bribes for registration and they fail to obtain refugee status or receive food rations if they cannot pay. Meanwhile, some refugees inflated family attestation cards or increased the number of family members to receive more food, in exchange for bribes. This corruption was exposed in the spring of 2018 (Sserunjogi 2018). In response to this 'Refugee Scandal', which revealed the systematic inflation of refugee numbers, the UNHCR instituted a large-scale biometric registration and verification programme for six months. It lasted until September 2018 (WFP

2018). The UNHCR sought to quantify the true number of Uganda-based refugees, reducing the possibility of corruption and refugees cheating the food ration system. After the verification program was completed, registration in multiple settlements or double registration of family members was banned to prevent the taking of double food rations. Instead, a cash transfer system was offered to refugees as an alternative option. Refugee families could choose to receive cash or food rations.

This change and stiffening of the food ration system did not resolve the food shortage in refugee settlements. Some refugees could no longer double register themselves and their families or collect food for the absentees, such as friends and kinsmen who had left the settlement and settled in local towns, as they had been able to do under the previous system. Although more transparent, the new food ration system harmed food security. Food rations are indispensable supplements, as insufficient food can be obtained by casual work alone. Refugees stranded in the refugee settlements depend on the minimal support and services offered only in rural settlements, not in towns.

Security concerns remain significant, even after the 2018 signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)[25]. Although the R-ARCSS was viewed positively by South Sudanese refugees, most recognised that the peace process is so fragile there is no guarantee that it will end the conflicts. Fighting between government forces and a rebel group that rejected the signing of the R-ARCSS has continued in the Uganda-South Sudan border areas. Even after the peace agreement that was established, based on political arrangements between the politico-military elites in South Sudan, incidents such as road ambushes on the highway, indiscriminate murders in Juba or other towns, inter-and intra-communal conflicts in rural areas such as cattle-raiding have been rampant and there are no clear signs that such violence will end. Therefore, most refugees are unwilling to return home.

In 2019, the Ugandan government changed its attitude towards South Sudanese refugees. The Ugandan Minster for Refugees called on them to return home after the signing of the R-ARCSS, arguing that their country is ‘now peaceful’ (Ahimbisibwe and Belloni 2021: 20). This statement clearly shows that the Ugandan government prioritised the voluntary repatriation option of the three permanent solutions under the CRRF self-reliance and resilience policy. In Uganda, it is not expected that refugees, irrespective of how long they have been in the country, will be naturalised into Ugandan nationals.

In March 2020, when the first case of Covid-19 was reported in Uganda, refugee mobility and livelihoods were affected by new restrictions on cross-border movement (Okiror 2020). This has made it more difficult for some refugees in Uganda to visit South Sudan to check on their relatives and assets, through what had been relatively porous borders (Sebba 2020). In addition, national travel restrictions have had a significant impact on livelihoods, since refugees are no longer able to move to the next village

[25] R-ACRSS is the peace agreement between the rival political-military parties in South Sudan.

or town to find work, sell their produce or purchase supplies (ibid.).

4.3. Refugee response and mobility in KRS: Individual practices and journeys

In the KRS, new waves of refugees include people with experience of exile. Many refugees who fled the South Sudan-Uganda border areas had been refugees before, some as many as three times (in the 1960s, 1990–2000s and the present). Almost all Sudanese Acholi and Madi were refugees in the KRS, other Ugandan settlements and Kenyan camps in the 1990s–2000s. Moreover, many continued to move across borders even after they were registered in Uganda. (Murahashi 2018). For young males who have relatives and some family members in Ugandan towns, leaving and returning to settlements has been constant for various reasons, such as attending college or university in Gulu, visiting relatives in Kampala and attending funerals at home in South Sudan.

Here, I present the narratives of two refugees and their life stories as materials for discussing how individual refugees employ mobility to sustain their lives. The first case is Dominic from the Madi in South Sudan, an adult orphan in his early 30s. Dominic narrates the experience of his family as follows[26]:

> I was raised as an orphan in a town near the Sudan–Uganda border after my parents were killed during the Second Sudanese Civil War (supposedly 1980s–early 1990s). I stayed in [the] KRS, protected by a Catholic priest's family during the 2000s, but I was chased away by the host family after the pastor died. After the signing of the CPA, I repatriated [to] South Sudan. When fighting broke out in Juba in December 2013, soldiers searched for houses and looted all properties. My house burned down. I decided to go back to Kiryandongo, but I have not registered yet and stayed in a settlement because I am afraid of my former 'family'. When I asked them to add me as a family member, they refused. If there is no family, it is challenging for me to get support.

In 2014, Dominic started an informal job as a 'mobile photographer' with his friend's support. He takes photos of people, both refugees and Ugandans, in and around the KRS. Every 10 days, he goes to photo studios in Kampala to retouch and develop them. There is a high demand for photographs of host communities and refugees among the residents of the KRS.

He expected to benefit from more business opportunities by staying in the town rather than settling. He emphasised that being a 'mobile photographer' was his only means of survival and said, 'Suppose, I live in the refugee settlement, I will have no money. Nobody will help me'. He wants to resume his schooling at all costs, because it stopped at the primary level due to a lack of money.

[26] This narrative is from my field note, written in 2015, based on my interview with Dominic.

His life was punctuated by several upheavals. He was robbed of most of his belongings by a thief in mid-2015. He can no longer rent a house in the town or take refuge in the nearby church. He told me that in such a situation, 'All I can do is pray to God'. Moreover, he was hospitalised in a nearby city after he fell seriously ill and collapsed on the road.

Later, he told me that he had been unconscious in the hospital for some days and could not move even after he was revived. This crisis led to a new encounter. A Ugandan woman cared for him while he was hospitalised, and they began to live together in the town soon after he was discharged. They bore a son in 2016 and were registered as a refugee family in the KRS. Although his marriage was not guaranteed by any payment of a bridal price, the mother of his girlfriend allowed them to stay together[27]. When he had a new family, he decided to register as a refugee with his wife and son, and successfully obtained refugee status.

He is currently running a kiosk and resumed his job as a mobile photographer in Bweyale. He aspires to lease a plot of land in a town and bring over his aunt, who has lived alone in a suburb of Kampala since her husband passed away[28]. Like other South Sudanese youth, his life is uncertain and contingent on social conditions (*i.e*. war, death of biological family members, his adoptive family's refusal to accept him, looting and theft). His future aspirations do not include repatriation, as his wife is unwilling to stay in South Sudan and he has no job and only a few relatives to care for them. Instead, he opted to settle in Uganda to stay with his family.

The second subject in this study is Alex, a former rebel soldier in his late thirties from Moru in South Sudan. He did not become a refugee until 2014. He had been 'in the bush,' implying that he was fighting as a guerrilla soldier for the SPLA, during the Sudanese Civil War. However, the SPLA targeted his ethnic group, due to political antagonism between the South Sudanese government and local supporters.

Soon after his arrival, Alex had several entrepreneurial ideas (*i.e.* the transnational trade of maize produced in the settlement to South Sudan). He received four acres of land from the OPM and began commercial farming. While many refugee farmers were not successful, he applied trial and error to increase agricultural inputs and productivity. He worked on farming various cash crops, such as vegetables, fruit, and sunflowers, and introduced an irrigation system into the settlement. His efforts were evaluated and rewarded by NGOs, and he was hailed as a 'model farmer' in the KRS. His tribesmen and kin have high expectations of him, and regard him as a leader who can rebuild the community in the KRS.

---

[27] The woman hailed from Ugandan Acholi. The people from the Uganda–South Sudan border area, such as the Acholi and the Madi, have similar cultural habits. Intermarriage between two ethnic groups is not rare, even though there are not many cases of marriage between refugees and Ugandans.

[28] The Refugees Act of 2006 in Uganda, states that refugees cannot own the land they cultivate or the homes they live in — even if they have lived in the country for years. However, the growing population of refugees requires the leasing of land outside of the refugee settlements for use in some refugee-hosting areas, which raises issues over land between refugees and Ugandan nationals.

However, this does not mean that Alex has become a successful farmer, fully managing household budgets. A lack of initial capital, an insufficient water system for irrigation, internal disputes between refugees, and low payments for NGO extension workers were all obstacles to living in the camp.

Alex believes that educational opportunities for his children will ensure a better future for him and them, although expensive school fees place a financial burden on the household. He said, 'I have to pay school fees for my children. Education for children will lead them toward a better future. However, school fees, including boarding, costs too much, and I cannot manage the total expenses'[29].

He began to imagine a different future after five years of camp life. The first was the dream of resettlement in a third country. As refugees in the KRS believe, the transnational network between the refugee settlement and a third resettlement country can provide a great opportunity to overcome stagnation, and pursue a better life. In 2018, Alex's neighbour resettled in Australia through a family reunification program. It is believed in the KRS that only those with families and relatives abroad can manage life in the camp, as they receive remittances from them. Alex obtained a resettlement form from a friend in Australia and applied to the Ugandan authorities. His application was almost approved, but he was asked to pay a heavy bribe that he could not afford.

In February 2020, following signs that the South Sudanese government and the opposition could compromise in the implementation of the R-ARCSS, he decided to leave the settlement and return to Juba. Although he had already given up joining the opposition armed groups, he was always regarded as a rebel commander in his hometown. Travelling home could have been a risk to his life. He said, 'I decided to leave the military because it is extremely useless in the current situation. I lost interest in serving my country because everybody is engaged in fighting for no good reason. Thus, I cannot find any reason to fight in South Sudan'.

In February 2020, when the government decided to collaborate with the armed opposition groups to form a new government, he returned to South Sudan. He is now self-employed in Juba, and has decided to leave his wife and children in the KRS so that they can benefit from the safe environment and proper education offered in Uganda.

5. Concluding remarks

The dynamics of many contemporary South Sudanese movements across the South Sudan-Ugandan border suggest the continuation of the mobility patterns of earlier generations. During the fighting, both the Ugandans and South Sudanese repeatedly crossed the shared border to escape the civil wars. Currently, most of the South Sudanese who fled the recent conflict in South Sudan, remain in Uganda even after the peace agreement, looking at an opportunity to return. The South Sudanese who are living

[29] This narrative is taken from my field notes written in 2018 based on my interview with Alex.

in exile have to cope with uncertain social and security conditions, while Uganda now hosts an unprecedented number of refugees.

Most refugees continue to investigate new possibilities to live and realise a better future in highly uncertain conditions. Most of their attempts to maintain their livelihoods are directed toward their and their descendants' futures, particularly focusing on education. The classic care and maintenance programme has been criticised as it does not include any plans, whereas self-reliance and resilience policies foster refugees' hope for a better future. However, many refugees face challenges due to structural constraints (*i.e.* income generation, employment, living costs and educational expenses). Transnational networks between their homes in South Sudan and refugees in Uganda, or between refugees in Uganda and their relatives in developed countries, play a key role in coping with uncertain lives. Even Alex, who was regarded as a successful refugee farmer by the NGOs, failed to realise his expectations and aspirations, due to insufficient NGO support.

In the camps, individual refugees aspire to different futures, according to their original plans for their lives, as well as their experiences in the settlement (*i.e.* third-country resettlement). Whenever they fail to find any tangible future in exile, they tend to escape into an imaginary world and harbour a fatalistic attitude toward their future.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows (JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP17J09937 and by the 2020 Canon Foundation in Europe/Kyoto University Japan-Africa Exchange Program for fieldwork. During my fieldwork, I was supported by the OPM, the UNHCR in Uganda and the refugees in the KRS. I would also like to express my thanks to the anonymous referees and Editage (www.editage.com) for English language editing. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

Ahimbisibwe, F. and M. Belloni 2021. 'The 2006 Refugees Act in Uganda: Analyzing the Gap Between Law and Practice'. In *Afriche e orienti: anno XXII 2020(1). Refugees in Uganda Between Politics and Everyday Practices*. Ed. S. de Simone, San Marino: AIEP Editore, 9-28. <https://www.aiepeditore.com/portfolio-articoli/the-2006-refugees-act-in-uganda-analyzing-the-gap-between-law-and-practice / Accessed on 27 October 2021>

Akol, J.O. 1994. 'A Crisis of Expectations: Returning to Southern Sudan in the 1970s'. In *When Refugees Go Home.* Eds. T. Allen and H. Morsink, Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), 78-95.

Charsley, S.R. 1968. 'Population Growth and Development in Northeast Bunyoro'. *East African Geographical Review* 6: 13-22.

—— 1974. 'The Formation of Ethnic Groups'. In *Urban Ethnicity*. Ed. A. Cohen, London: Tavistock Publications, 337-368.

Crawford, N., J. Cosgrave, S. Haysom, and N. Walicki. 2015. *Protracted Displacement: Uncertain Paths to Self-reliance in Exile (HPG Commissioned Report).* London: Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) - Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

Kaiser, T. 2000a. 'The Experience and Consequences of Insecurity in a Refugee Populated Area in Northern Uganda 1996-97'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 19(1): 38-53.

—— 2000b. 'UNHCR's Withdrawal from Kiryandongo: An Anatomy of a Handover'. *New Issues in Refugee Research*, *Working Paper 32*. Geneva: UNHCR.

—— 2006a. 'Between a Camp and a Hard Place: Rights, Livelihoods and Experiences of the Local Settlement System for Long-term Refugees in Uganda'. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 44(4): 597-621.

—— 2006b. 'Hopes for the Future: The Case of Sudanese Refugees in Uganda'. *Accord* 18: 72-73.

—— 2007. 'Moving Up and Down Looking for Money: Making a Living in a Ugandan Refugee Camp'. In *Livelihoods at the Margins: Surviving the City*. Ed. J. Staples, Walnut Creek: West Coast Press, 215-236.

—— 2008. 'Sudanese Refugees in Uganda and Kenya'. In *Protracted Refugee Situations: Political, Human Rights and Security Implications*. Eds. G. Loescher, J. Milner, E. Newman, and G. Troeller, Tokyo, New York: United Nations University Press, 248-276.

Koser, K. and R. Black 1999. 'The End of the Refugee Cycle?' In *The End of the Refugee Cycle?: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*. Eds. R. Black and K. Koser, New York: Berghahn Books, 2-17.

Lingelbach, J. 2020. *On the Edges of Whiteness: Polish Refugees in British Colonial Africa During and After the Second World War*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Long, K. and J. Crisp 2010. 'Migration, Mobility and Solutions: An Evolving Perspective'. *Forced Migration Review* 35: 56-57.

Moro, L. 2019. 'What It Means to Be a "Refugee" in South Sudan and Uganda'. LSE blog. The Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa - the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). 28 May. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/05/28/what-it-means-to-be-a-refugee-in-south-sudan-and-uganda / Accessed on 27 October 2021>

Okiror, S. 2020. 'In the News: Uganda Suspends Refugee Arrivals as Coronavirus Cases Rise'. The New Humanitarian. 25 March. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-uganda-refugees-idUSKBN21C2WV /

Accessed on 27 October 2021>

Mulumba, D. 2010. *Women Refugees in Uganda: Gender Relations, Livelihood Security and Reproductive Health.* Kampala: Fountain Publishers.

Murahashi, I. 2018. 'Reorganizing "Family" to Secure Livelihoods: Coping Strategies of South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda'. In *Diversification and Reorganization of 'Family' in Uganda and Kenya: A Cross-cultural Analysis.* Eds. W. Shiino, S. Shiraishi, and C.M. Mpyangu, Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 15-25.

—— 2021. 'Conflict-induced Migration and Local Development: The Socio-economic Dynamics of a Refugee-hosting Area in Uganda'. *ASC-TUFS Working Papers* 1: 253-272.

Scalettaris, G. 2009. 'Refugee and Mobility'. *Forced Migration Review* 33: 58-59.

Sebba, K.R. 2020. 'Mobility and Covid-19: A Case Study of Uganda'. Research and Evidence Facility (REF) blog, EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. 7 August. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/2020/08/07/mobility-and-covid-19-a-case-study-of-uganda / Accessed on 27 October 2021>

Sserunjogi, E.M. 2018. 'Refugee Scandal: The Inside Story'. Daily Monitor. 10 February. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Refugee-scandal-inside-story/688334-4298332-14ke2syz/index.html / Accessed on 27 October 2021>

UBOS (Uganda Bureau of Statistics) 2014. *The National Population and Housing Census 2014*. Kampala: UBOS.

UNHCR (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) 2021a. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020*. Geneva.

—— 2021b. *Refugees and Asylum–Seekers in Uganda: Uganda Refugee Response.* 30 November. Kampala: OPM and UNHCR. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90182 / Accessed on 24 December 2021>

WFP (The World Food Programme) 2018. 'OPM and UNHCR Complete Countryside Biometric Refugee Verification Exercise'. WFP News Release. 29 October. <https://www.wfp.org/news/opm-and-unhcr-complete-countrywide-biometric-refugee-verification-exercise / Accessed on 27 October 2021>

Yonekawa, M. 2020. 'Introduction'. In *Repatriation, Insecurity, and Peace: A Case Study of Rwandan Refugees*. Eds. M. Yonekawa and A. Sugiki, Singapore: Springer, vii-xx.