

REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS IN UGANDA

Agency, Gender, and Politics of Self-Organizing in Exile

Ulrike Krause, Gato Ndabaramiye Joshua, and Hannah Schmidt

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Refugee-Led Organizations in Uganda

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ULRIKE KRAUSE,
GATO NDABARAMIYE JOSHUA,
and HANNAH SCHMIDT

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individuals by name, but we are endlessly grateful for their contributions. Exchange and collaboration did not end after we completed this research – indeed, it continues to this day, and we look forward to future discussions and engagements.

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The importance of critical research and global collaboration is increasingly evident. We are finalizing this book at a time when the political situation is becoming more tense worldwide, with governments turning against people seeking asylum and adopting restrictive policies that focus on the protection of borders rather than of displaced people. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has further strained resources, exacerbating and intensifying the vulnerabilities of refugees

all over the world. Neoliberal structures that prioritize economic interests over humanitarian concerns are on the rise, a trend we also see reflected in Uganda. Refugees' self-organizations, long neglected, are beginning to receive more attention – in Uganda and globally. Yet, the focus remains largely on formalized self-organizations, with the result that the crucial role of informal structures in displaced people's everyday lives in exile is often overlooked. By centring the insights that interlocutors generously shared with us, we seek to highlight in the chapters ahead the critical relevance of refugee-led initiatives in fostering their own protection, advocating for political participation and access to their rights, creating social spaces of trust and support, and generating economic opportunities.

Abbreviations

ACTV	African Center for Treatment of Torture Victims
AHA	Africa Humanitarian Action
ARN	Africa Refugee-Led Network
ASOFRA	Association de femmes Réfugiées en Afrique (Association of Refugee Women in Africa)
CBO	community-based organization
CBT	cash-based transfers
CHW	community health worker
CIYOTA	COBURWAS International Youth Organization to Transform Africa
CRCU	Congolese Refugee Community in Uganda
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
CSB	corn-soy blend
DAR	Development Assistance for Refugee Hosting Areas for Uganda Self-Reliance Strategy
DR Congo	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
EVI	extremely vulnerable individual
FRC	Finnish Refugee Council
FRRM	feedback, referral, and resolution mechanisms
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
GRN	Global Refugee-Led Network
HIAS	Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
HOCW	Hope for Children and Women Victims of Violence
HRA	Hope for Refugees in Action
INGO	international NGO

KITAD	Kyaka Interpreters, Translators Association for Development
KRLON	Kyaka II Refugee-Led Organisations Network
LERRN	Local Engagement Refugee Research Network
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and further people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MDD	music, dance, and drama
NGO	non-governmental organization
NRV	Network for Refugee Voices
NWC	New Women Connectors
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PEPA	Pleaders of Children and Elderly People at Risk
PPDR	People for Peace and Defense for Rights
PSN	persons with specific needs
REAL	Refugee Entrepreneurship Association Limited
REF	Refugee Engagement Forum
ReHOPE	Refugee and Host Population Empowerment
REHORE	Restoration and Hope for Refugees
RELON Uganda	Refugee Led Organisation Network Uganda
RGN	Refugee Grassroots Network
RLO	refugee-led organization
ROSCA	rotating savings and credit association
R-SEAT	Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table
R-Space	Refugee Leadership Multipurpose Space
RWC	Refugee Welfare Council
RWF	Refugee Welfare Foundation
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
SRS	Self-Reliance Strategy
STA	Settlement Transformation Agenda
STD	sexually transmitted disease
TASO IRC	TASO Institutional Review Committee
TSFP	Targeted Supplementary Feeding Programme
UNCST	Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UNRSPO	Uganda Network for Refugees Services Providers' Organizations
URRP	Urban Refugee Rights Program
VSLA	village savings and loan associations
WASH	water, sanitation, and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
YARID	Young African Refugees for Integral Development
YIDA	Youth Initiative for Development in Africa

REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS IN UGANDA

1

Self-Organizing in Exile

An Introduction

"We co-operate with each other. When there is a problem, we help each other" – so said a member of a neighbourhood collective in Kyaka II, a refugee camp in Uganda.[1] He described to us how they strategically join their efforts and self-organize to create "good relationship with the neighbours," support each other in times of need, form social spaces of belonging, and collectively provide security. He further explained that, on arrival in Uganda as well as throughout the long years of life in exile, humanitarian assistance often falls short. With no political solution in sight, refugees have to find and establish ways to support themselves and each other in coping with and improving the difficult conditions in exile.

Such narratives about the great relevance of self-organizing were shared by many interlocutors not only in Kyaka II but also in Uganda's capital, Kampala, where no external humanitarian aid is provided. As such, interlocutors underscored how, "as refugees, we come together"[2] in agricultural collectives to yield crops to survive, or self-organize in savings groups and other economic networks to build businesses and generate income;[3] how they offer "peer counselling"[4] after trauma in groups initiated and led by and for youth, women,

1 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
2 Man from DR Congo, discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.
3 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala. See also chapter 6.
4 Discussion with three men and two women from DR Congo, 17 July 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 February 2021, Kampala. See also chapter 5.

and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and further people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQ+);[5] and how they formalize refugee-led organizations to provide diverse support including legal advice, shelter, language courses, and vocational training over the course of many years.[6] Moreover, family, friendship, and further social circles do not simply exist as quasi-natural social systems in exile; all too often conflict and displacement disrupts or even destroys them. Interlocutors described how such (new) close social networks frequently signify the most important self-organized connections.[7] These are just some examples of the wide spectrum of self-organizations that interlocutors addressed during our research in Uganda – along with the value they carry for individuals' everyday lives in exile.

The critical role played by self-organization among refugees is at the heart of this book. Based on empirical research with displaced people primarily from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and Somalia in Uganda's Kyaka II and Kampala, our study focuses on individuals' lived experiences of exile and self-organization. In addition to addressing Uganda's refugee regime with its political objectives, legal provisions, and humanitarian system as the contextual structure, our core interest lies in exploring the wide range of refugees' self-organization as socially embedded in their everyday lives in exile. By approaching self-organization not only as an institution but also as a practice, we shed light on how individuals exercise agency collectively by providing support in times of need, contributing to social belonging, and supporting livelihoods. Bringing their lived experience within similar circumstances together, they draw on and share their situated knowledges on how to cope with challenges and build lives and livelihoods. To not only analyze interlocutors' narratives but also provide a platform on which they share

5 As explained below, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

6 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, discussion, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II. See also chapter 4.

7 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II. See also chapter 5.

their own perspectives, we are fortunate to include reflections about life and self-organization in exile by Bengekya Mugay Gédéon, Noella Kabale, Paul*,[8] Janvier Hafasha, Isreal Katembo, and the Director of an LGBTQ+ refugee-led organization.[9] We are endlessly grateful to all those who have spoken with us and shared their stories.

In the following sections, we first introduce the conditions experienced by refugees and their protection in Uganda before detailing our approach to self-organization through the lens of relational agency. Next, we provide insights into the research conducted in Kyaka II and Kampala, share ethical reflections, and outline the structure of the book.

FLEEING TO UGANDA SEEKING SAFETY AND PROTECTION

With almost 1.8 million refugees, the Republic of Uganda, situated in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, is among the countries hosting the largest number of displaced people worldwide (see UNHCR 2024c). Large-scale displacement is not limited to contemporary times but is also evident in Uganda's history. Even before the colonial powers merged the area's erstwhile territories into what is today known as Uganda, people were affected by violence and displacements. This includes enslavement, with the trading of enslaved people to other regions of the world, as a particular form of forced migration – and forced immobility (Amone and Muura 2014; Medard and Doyle 2007). During British colonial rule of the Uganda Protectorate from 1894, colonial violences and conflicts – also against those resisting domination – contributed to displacement locally (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 2011; Otunnu 2016, 71–155). With the imperial powers seeking to expand their dominance, violence further emerged about and along borders. As Otunnu explains, "By the time the Uganda-Congo and Uganda-Rwanda borders took their current shape, the boundaries had shifted many times. The shifting frontiers violently uprooted and split many pre-colonial states, families, cemeteries, shrines, villages and homesteads. Some of the nationalities

8 The writer sought to remain anonymous and chose to use the pseudonym Paul.

9 Due to security reasons, the writer also remains anonymous. Instead of using a pseudonym, they decided to be identified by their role.

ended up as minorities in the three states: Uganda, Rwanda and Congo" (2016, 77). This is only one of many examples of the violent effects of colonial rule on displacement.

From 1955 onward, conflicts in nearby Sudan (then the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan), Kenya (then Kenya Colony), Burundi and Rwanda (then Ruanda-Urundi), but also Somalia (then Jubaland and British Somaliland) and Ethiopia, led to people fleeing and seeking safety in Uganda (Otunnu 1994, 1999, 2016; Mulumba 2010, 60–99). Displacement was not regionally limited to African countries, however; from 1941 until 1952, British colonial authorities settled European Second World War refugees, especially from Poland, in colonized southern and eastern Africa, including in Uganda (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1993; Lingelbach 2020; Tshimba 2022). In addition to Polish refugees, prisoners of war from Italy, civilian internees from Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia, and stateless Jewish people were brought to Uganda (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1993, 1). The colonial authorities sought to make them self-sufficient in camps, representing a remarkable point of overlap with the focus on self-reliance that is still pursued in Uganda's refugee response today.

Since the country's self-government in 1961 and independence from 9 October 1962, refugees have continued to flee to Uganda, mainly from neighbouring and nearby countries such as DR Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea. Moreover, internal conflicts and displacements have occurred time and again. Most notable is the violent conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda, lasting twenty years (1986–2006) and resulting in the internal displacement of more than 1.6 million people in northern Uganda, primarily in the Acholi[10] region in Gulu and Kitgum Districts (see Dolan 2009; Oloya 2013). Unrest and violence in the eastern and southwestern regions of Uganda would likewise contribute to further internal displacement (Rugadya et al. 2006; Kamara et al. 2017).

Over the course of the past years, the number of people seeking asylum and safety in Uganda has continued to increase due to ongoing or recurring violence and conflicts primarily in South Sudan, DR Congo, and Rwanda, but also in Burundi, Ethiopia, Somalia,

10 On the colonial creation of the Acholi ethnic identity, see Amone and Muura (2014); on the colonial legacy of violence and conflict in Uganda, see Kabwegyere (1972) and Bøås (2004).

Eritrea, and Kenya (e.g., UNHCR 2024b). In the early 1990s, Uganda received large numbers of refugees fleeing the genocide in Rwanda as well as the conflicts in Sudan and DR Congo (Lomo et al. 2001; Ahimbisibwe 2019). Following the referendum in South Sudan in 2011, a civil war erupted in 2013, leading to new displacements; by 2017, Uganda was hosting over a million South Sudanese refugees, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa (Nyadera 2018; UNHCR 2017a). Yet, in addition to those newly displaced, many find themselves in protracted situations; some have been in the country for decades due to a lack of access to durable solutions. That such long-term displacement exists in Uganda is evident not least in the fact that some camps had already been in use since the 1960s (e.g., UNHCR 1968, para. 150).

To respond to refugees' arrival and long-term stay, a political regime has emerged and solidified in Uganda. It captures the political, legal, humanitarian, social, and economic framework governing the reception, protection, assistance, and management of refugees. Institutional structures of the regime involve close collaboration between the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) of the Government of Uganda, international organizations, especially the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), diverse non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local authorities. At the core of the regime lies the legal foundation, comprising the Refugees Act of 2006 and the Refugees Regulations of 2010, which replaced the prior legal act from 1960 shaped by colonial rule (Government of Uganda 1960, 2006, 2010). The 2006 Refugees Act entered into force in 2009 and builds on key international standards such as the 1951 Refugee Convention with its 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. Underpinned by this legislative framework, Uganda grants refugees fundamental rights, including freedom of movement, employment opportunities, and access to vital public services like education and health care – at least on paper. However, we will show that various restrictions persist.

Moreover, Uganda's refugee policies are inherently shaped by the political objectives of linking humanitarian protection with development aid, for which it has been praised repeatedly. Central to this approach is the promotion of refugees' self-reliance, which revolves around their cultivation of plots of land for agricultural purposes in encampments, where several NGOs also deliver aid services (for

critical reflections on Uganda's approach, see also Ahimbisibwe 2014; Ilcan et al. 2015; Gidron and Hovil 2018; Omata 2022; Grześkowiak 2024). Indeed, the majority of refugees in Uganda are housed in camp sites termed "refugee settlements," which are primarily located in the western, northwestern, and southwestern areas of the country (UNHCR 2024c). The 2006 Refugees Act supports this approach. Although it officially grants those holding refugee status the right to freedom of movement within Uganda, and thus also the right to settle in the country freely, the reality is very different. On the one hand, the Refugees Act assigns refugees to "designated places" (Government of Uganda 2006, art. 44), effectively limiting them to these settlements. Interlocutors repeatedly stressed that their freedom of movement was constrained by authorities. On the other hand, even if they move on to live elsewhere in Uganda, humanitarian aid is provided only in the settlements, ultimately leaving those in urban areas without external support. These structures make up Uganda's refugee regime and shape the lives and livelihoods of those seeking asylum in the country.

In spite of the restrictions, many decide to live in cities such as Kampala. Between 2016 and 2017, the years when we carried out much of our research, the refugee population had grown from about 86,000 to almost 95,000 in Kampala (UNHCR 2016, 2017b). While we finalized this book in 2024, 156,761 refugees were recorded as living in Uganda's capital (UNHCR 2024c). Self-settled refugees in Kampala hail from a diverse range of countries; the majority from Somalia, followed by those from DR Congo and South Sudan, but also from Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. While they are allowed to apply to stay outside these settlements, they need official approval to do so – for which they have to prove their self-sufficiency. Since the application process is challenging, many interlocutors explained that they had moved to the city without such permission or ended up there by chance (see also chapter 5). Despite them noting their greater freedom to live as they wish, they are exposed to discrimination, gender-based violence, limited livelihoods, and a broad lack of aid in Uganda's cities.

Although access to aid is provided in these settlements, life remains difficult. Kyaka II is one such site. The initial Kyaka was set up for refugees from Rwanda in 1967. In 1984, its successor, Kyaka II, was established in a rural area of Kyegegwa District, central Uganda, on the site it still occupies, but it was not fully used until 1994 due to

unrest (Krause 2021, 10–12).[11] Today, most people living in Kyaka II are from DR Congo, and in smaller numbers from Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan. While initially set up for about 17,000 refugees in the 1980s, its population would increase to more than 29,000 in 2016, slightly decrease to about 24,000 in 2017, and then grow significantly to nearly 131,994 people by 2024 (UNHCR 1985, para. 151; 2016, 2017b, 2024c). The Government of Uganda allocated an area of approximately eighty-four square kilometres to Kyaka II; it is government-owned land, limiting potential disputes between Ugandans and refugees. The camp is under the overall supervision of OPM and UNHCR while protection and assistance are implemented by a number of NGOs. These realize diverse projects ranging from management to shelter, health care, nutrition, education, water, sanitation, and hygiene – with the primary focus being on fostering refugees' self-reliance. Kyaka II is structured into nine zones and twenty-six clusters, which are set up as villages and spread out across the site. The base camp is relatively central and hosts the offices of OPM, aid organizations, and police, as well as staff accommodation, a guesthouse, local market, health centre, and the so-called safe houses where especially vulnerable people in immediate danger can receive short-term shelter. Despite the aid services, interlocutors criticized the highly restrictive conditions, prevalent gender-based violence, economic hardships, and long-term uncertainties concerning their future.

Considering the complex challenges, denoting these sites as "settlements" or even "local rural refugee settlements" is grossly misleading, as it gives the impression of people being able to freely settle there and dwell in their communities – thus concealing the actual institutional setup and the pressure to conform (Krause 2021, 9–14; Schmidt 2023, 15–17). In fact, refugees have to live there per the Refugees Act (Government of Uganda 2006, art. 44). These sites essentially fulfill the central characteristics of encampment with their spatial boundedness, their – at least imagined – temporally limited setting, their designation for a specific group of people, and the governance, control, and aid provision of government authorities and aid organizations within their confines (e.g., Turner 2010; Agier 2011; Jaji 2012; McConnachie

11 Only in 2008 was its predecessor closed down, after large-scale repatriations to Rwanda took place and some of those who remained were relocated to Kyaka II (Danish Refugee Council 2018, 2).

2014, 2016; Minca 2015; Krause 2018; Brankamp 2022). Paradoxically, although the settlement approach has been politically highlighted for decades now, the labelling of these sites has varied between "settlement," "camps/centers," "planned/managed camp," "self-settled camp," and even "individual accommodation" over time and across different policies (Krause 2022, 146–8). To avoid reproducing this sort of humanitarian speak, in the following chapters we refer to such sites as "camps" rather than "settlements."

While these structural conditions, with their core focus on fostering self-reliance, might appear to reflect improvements compared to other camps worldwide, the perspectives and lived experiences that displaced people shared with us strongly differ. We show in chapter 3 that regardless of this development orientation and self-reliance focus, the humanitarian system and aid apparatus established in Kyaka II are, in fact, limiting: The people continue to depend on aid structures and be confronted with various prevalent risks and restrictions. Moreover, despite employing a participatory approach and promoting refugees' collective actions, government authorities and aid organizations instrumentalize refugee groups as part of the self-reliance focus, which causes additional challenges.

Widespread challenges in both camp and urban areas in Uganda render refugees' self-organizations central to their everyday lives. By self-organizing, individuals navigate the prevalent political, social, economic, and further problems they are exposed to. This relevance is evident in the insights many conversation partners shared about their lives and self-organizations in Kampala and Kyaka II. Among them was one woman involved in one of the few self-organizations led by and for women, ASOFRA (the Association de femmes Réfugiées en Afrique, or Association of Refugee Women in Africa), based in Kampala. She pointed out, "We combined our efforts to form this group in order to help each other psychologically because the way we fled from our different countries. Some of us were suffering from trauma, others had different challenges, and the assistance from the NGOs was not reliable."[12] The woman's recounting of how refugees join forces is expressive in and of itself. It unveils the deep significance of their self-organization, illustrating how their collectives represent

12 To preserve anonymity, we do not reference – or provide references for information directly relating to – the individuals cited in the book (unless otherwise stated).

an essential part of people's difficult lives in exile. However, their self-organization embodies not merely survival mechanisms developed in response to adversities. Rather, it is a profound expression of agency, revealing how refugees navigate and contest the precarious camp and urban conditions, establish their own support structures, build and increase livelihoods, provide much-needed help during emergencies, as well as shape their social surrounding for comfort and belonging. As we will detail in the following chapters, the self-organizations not only run parallel to Uganda's refugee regime and demonstrate how people generate their own social structures, but also show how they contest, challenge, exceed, and bypass the regime and its restrictions.

APPROACHING REFUGEES' DIVERSE SELF-ORGANIZATIONS AS A PRACTICE AND AN INSTITUTION

Displaced people's collective actions and self-organizing occur worldwide. Moving beyond the focus on how they cope in displacement individually (for literature reviews, see, e.g., Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012; Gladden 2012; Seguin and Roberts 2017), attention to refugees' self-organizations has increased significantly since the late 2010s. Studies refer to a range of different concepts, such as refugee community organizations, refugee grassroots organizations, or refugee-led organizations (see also chapter 2) (e.g., Gonzalez Benson 2017; Pincock et al. 2020; Mencutek 2021; Nungsari and Chuah 2022; Kara et al. 2022; El Abed et al. 2023). Such research partly draws connections to, overlaps with, or simultaneously addresses migrant organizations, thereby bridging migration and forced migration studies (e.g., Babis 2016; Kirsch et al. 2023; Odugbesan and Schwiertz 2020; Pries and Sezgin 2012).

Among the few comprehensive studies about refugees' self-organizations published several years prior to the recent increase in attention is the book *Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal: Networks, Resources and Social Capital* by Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter (2005). They explore the roles of primarily established refugee community organizations in Great Britain, including the effects of legislative changes on and the social meanings of these collectives. Recent research continues to revolve around such established organizations, which we capture as formalized types of self-organizations

in this book. Studies highlight the diverse support that these organizations provide worldwide, be it regarding social integration, economic livelihoods, well-being, or access to rights and services (e.g., Gonzalez Benson 2017; Mayblin and James 2019; Meret and Diener 2019; Pincock et al. 2020; Mencutek 2021; Nungsari and Chuah 2022; Richlen 2022b). Established self-organizations' recognition further grew during the COVID-19 pandemic as it became evident how displaced people drew on their crucial knowledges about local conditions, challenges, and needs to mobilize support – frequently with little to no external funding or support (e.g., Alio et al. 2020; Refiloe Ogude and Chekero 2020; Boru 2020; Betts et al. 2021; Chandiga Justine 2021; Nungsari and Chuah 2022; Gonzalez Benson et al. 2022; Kirsch et al. 2023). This also sparked political and humanitarian interest, with increased calls to include refugee-led organizations in policymaking (e.g., Meyer and Ziegler 2018; UNHCR 2021a; Robert Bosch Stiftung 2021; Milner et al. 2022).

These debates provide crucial insights for our research, but we see some trends that require broadening. Refugees' self-organizations are often addressed as something exceptional, a stance that might seem plausible or even necessary given the restrictive and challenging political and legal conditions prevailing in exile with the victimizing and objectifying treatment of refugees in humanitarian systems. However, exceptionalizing refugees' self-organizations risks overshadowing their everyday relevance to and deep embeddedness in the social structures in exile. Along with this, the focus on established organization neglects more informally assembled types, such as self-organized family, friendship, and neighborhood collectives. Finally, focusing exclusively or primarily on self-organizations risks collectivizing or even ignoring the individuals who ultimately make up self-organizations.

In our book, we seek to contribute to deepening the research debates by addressing these gaps and paying careful attention to the everyday relevance of refugees' diverse forms of self-organization. To this end, we set six focus areas that have emerged from our analysis:

1 During the research in Uganda, we learned how much time and effort individuals invest to mobilize themselves in order to improve their conditions in exile. Their activities to initiate, lead, shape, maintain, and engage in collectives are part of their everyday lives in exile and based on their lived experiences in the past and in the present. To emphasize individuals' decisive roles, we use the terms

self-organizations and refugee-led organizations synonymously, reflecting their autonomy and leadership. Yet, we tend to employ self-organization more frequently because it captures a twofold meaning that is highly relevant: *self-organization as an institution and a practice*. On the one hand, the people found and manage self-organizations as an institution or body, and on the other, they mobilize themselves and collective initiatives for various purposes through the practice of self-organization.

2 The perspective on individuals' practices and lived experiences is crucial and guides our theoretical approach on relational agency complemented by situated knowledges (see chapter 2). In lieu of homogenizing people in a group focus, we pay careful attention to how individuals perceive and use self-organization, and how *self-organization essentially means individuals' practising relational agency*. Hence, their everyday practices and lived experiences are key. We explore how individuals come together, form, and engage in self-organizations in Kyaka II and Kampala; what meanings individuals ascribe to self-organization; and how individuals and their self-organizations contribute to social lives and economic livelihoods in various ways. We thereby contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relation between individual and collective endeavours and the dynamics of agency in regard to self-organization. Yet we also explore what issues self-organizations are confronted with and how they can become burdensome for individuals, cautioning against overenthusiasm about people's agency, options, and opportunities in restrictive settings in exile and emphasizing that self-organization is not only or per se good.

3 A wide range of different forms of self-organizations occur in Uganda through which individuals engage in collective support to help each other but partly also to turn a profit – despite and indeed due to the precarious conditions and restrictions they face in the camp and the city. The organizational forms encompass family and friend groups, neighbourhood collectives, cultural groups, self-help groups, economic networks, women's groups, religious collectives, savings groups, legal support associations, and long-standing registered organizations – to name just some examples. This ultimately reflects *individuals' self-organizations assuming various types, from informal collectives to formalized entities*. Despite the different areas and

set-ups, these have in common the collective efforts of individuals for mutual support, protection, livelihoods, and well-being. It is precisely this broad spectrum of self-organizations and refugees' activities for them that we focus on.

4 The everyday support that refugees' self-organizations develop and provide is vital, and spans all spheres of life, including social, economic, political, legal, cultural, religious, and further domains. They draw on, harness, and contribute to the power of community. As such, *self-organizations represent the first responders in times of need as well as key providers in everyday life in exile*. This captures the institutional and practice features of self-organization in its complex spectrum. Acknowledging the wide-ranging support and routine relevance of self-organizations is crucial if we are to avoid the pitfall of exceptionalizing some self-organizations' key roles.

5 While self-organization is socially embedded as an integral part of everyday life, individuals experience exile and self-organization differently. Social relations, gender hierarchies, and ascribed roles diverge among individuals, triggering varying challenges, needs, and also opportunities. Many self-organizations in Uganda subsequently set out to provide support offers by and for specific groups, youth, women, or LGBTQ+ people, for example. Moreover, the room to manoeuvre and self-organize varies among individuals, and most of the leading roles in formalized self-organizations are male-dominated, mirroring societal conditions. Thus, *self-organizations are influenced by and influence gendered dynamics*, which is important to acknowledge and explore so as to capture social embeddedness.

6 Finally, although the people's lived experiences of displacement and self-organization take centre stage, the effects of Uganda's refugee regime with its political, legal, and humanitarian regulations cannot be entirely dismissed. After all, the conditions people encounter in Uganda are frequently shaped, or even produced, by the regime, and their practices are partly a direct reaction to its political objectives, legal restrictions, and (limited) aid measures. As a result, we approach *Uganda's refugee regime as core contextual structures* that surround and influence individuals' lives and self-organizing. At the same time, we must acknowledge that their self-organizing can go beyond and be disconnected from these imposed structures, and that *individuals*

are always also embedded in social worlds. Relational agency thus remains central as individuals incorporate these structures into their expectations and evaluations of their situational possibilities.

These focus areas arise from our research and therefore the information that interlocutors shared. However, this book also has limitations. First, despite our gender-sensitive approach to research, we must address an unfortunate shortcoming concerning LGBTQ+ refugees. Due to the politically tense situation in Uganda, we were unable to work with LGBTQ+ refugees systematically. The Government of Uganda adopted an Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2014, and a more severe version in 2023, as we finalized the book, criminalizing same-sex relations and making life significantly worse for those concerned (see Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015; Thapa 2015; Bompani and Valois 2017; Jjuuko and Mutesi 2018; HRAPF 2023). Our key aim throughout has been to ensure that our research does not generate potential risks for interlocutors, and so we set limitations in our work. Only Ulrike Krause spoke with individuals who self-identified as LGBTQ+; neither Gato Ndabaramiye Joshua nor Hannah Schmidt collected any data with them. As much as the data allows, the book sheds light on the perspectives, experiences, and practices of queer refugees engaging in self-organization; however, it remains limited in scope and depth due to these constraints.

Moreover, the use of two cases may give some readers the impression, perhaps even an expectation, that we take a comparative approach. We purposefully decided against a comparative study in a strict methodological sense, and instead place the lived experiences that interlocutors shared with us in Kyaka II and Kampala at the core. Based on the ways in which interlocutors conveyed their experiences, it is important to connect and intertwine the conditions in Kyaka II and Kampala and thus transcend the conventional separation of the camp and the city as seemingly disconnected and unrelated sites in forced migration studies. The information that conversation partners shared ultimately reflects how they perceive their lives in both sites, and how their challenges as well as self-organizations exist, persist, and are interconnected across both environments. Hence, beyond dichotomizing the sites by ultimately comparing human lives, we focus on refugees' entangled experiences of life and self-organization in the camp and the city.

Finally, we conducted much of our research prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (see further details below). The insights of interlocutors remain relevant today, but the pandemic substantially worsened the conditions of those seeking asylum and safety in Uganda, intensifying existing challenges and giving rise to new ones. As a result, the already crucial support provided by self-organizations saw an even greater salience during the pandemic. While we are able to draw on and incorporate observations of Gato Ndabaramiye Joshua as well as additional research to shed light on the evolving circumstances people faced during and after the pandemic, it is important to note that our core findings are primarily based on information shared by interlocutors earlier.

RESEARCHING REFUGEES' SELF-ORGANIZATION IN UGANDA

The book draws on our work as part of the research project Global Refugee Protection and Local Refugee Engagement: Scope and Limits of the Agency of Refugee-Led, Community-Based NGOs (2016–22), which was led by Ulrike Krause, carried out with Hannah Schmidt as a doctoral researcher and Gato Ndabaramiye Joshua as an affiliated researcher. The project was generously funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and conducted at Marburg University and Osnabrück University. The data was primarily gathered in 2016 and 2017 in Uganda in the urban context of Kampala and in the camp setting of Kyaka II. In addition to this primary data-collection phase, Gato continued to live in Uganda afterwards and carry out further dialogues and observations. He, Krause, and Schmidt furthermore kept a close eye on developments in the country over time and stayed in touch with several interlocutors. Since the project started, we have been in contact with many individuals leading or engaging in self-organizations in Uganda and beyond. These various discussions shape our analysis of self-organizations in this book and help us make sense of developments in Uganda and beyond.

Conducting the Research

Prior to carrying out empirical research in Uganda, we underwent an ethical review and were granted the relevant research permissions. As a first step, we received ethical approval from the TASO Institutional

Review Committee (TASO IRC). Based on that, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) granted overall research permission and the OPM formally allowed us to undertake research on refugees in Kampala and Kyaka II. As a research team, we are thankful for the reviews and permissions.

For the research, we were able to work in a highly productive, international, and interdisciplinary team consisting of people with and without lived experiences of displacement who represent various fields of expertise including in gender studies, political science, international relations, clinical psychology, public health, and social work. Data gathering was divided; Krause was responsible for the case study in Kampala and Schmidt for the one in Kyaka II. Gato, who himself had experienced flight from DR Congo to Uganda, primarily worked in Kampala, but broadly contributed to the project by means of his research expertise, lived experiences, and extensive network. Our team was complemented by collaborating with Christine Nimusiima and Elvis Ndakyaisaba in Kyaka II and Clarissa Tumwine in Kampala. In the course of our research, we partly also worked with translators in Kyaka II and entered into various debates with people living there and in Kampala, including about the project itself and its research design. We sadly cannot address all individually by name for reasons of security and confidentiality. Since they knew the community very well, they contributed to shaping the research approach and helped build trustful relationships. Each team member was indispensable, and our collaboration was not limited to data collection, but extended to data analysis and publication. With this approach, we seek to learn from and with each other and foster lasting and equitable research co-operation (more below). The importance, and also challenges, of such collaborative partnerships in research are also highlighted in debates (e.g., Landau 2012; El Refaei 2020; Shuayb and Brun 2021; Shivakoti and Milner 2022; Reed and Schenck 2023).

To gather data, we employed a qualitative multi-method approach, including participatory observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, ero-epic dialogues, focus group discussions, journal writings, and transect walks. The triangulation of these qualitative methods served to validate results and obtain additional insights. During the overall process, we continually re-evaluated our research design as a team and made adjustments to the process, methods, and questions to ensure that the most sensitive approach possible was taken. A significant amount of data was collected.

Ero-epic dialogues served as the core method for data collection with displaced people in our research. This interpretative social science approach enabled us to actively engage interlocutors in both Kampala and Kyaka II. These dialogues are characterized by their unstructured and thematically guided format, taking place in a comfortable setting that interlocutors choose (Girtler 2001, 147–54). Prioritizing open conversation over traditional interviews, which often adhere to a rigid question format, this method allows interlocutors to direct the discussion according to their experiences and the issues they deem important. By fostering a more natural and open exchange, we encourage respondents to express themselves freely, leading to deeper insights into their lived experiences and enhancing the richness and relevance of the data collected. Overall, we conducted ero-epic dialogues with 247 refugees, including 127 who self-identified as women and 120 as men.

Moreover, 163 refugees took part in 31 focus group discussions in Kampala and in Kyaka II, 92 self-identified as women and 71 as men representing various status groups. Focus group discussions employ communicative and collective methods to foster participants interactions and discussions and thereby provide valuable insights (see also Acocella 2012; Hennink 2014). To gather perspectives of young people, we conducted 10 journal writings with those aged 15 to 19 in Kyaka II, including 6 who self-identified as girls and 4 as boys. Journal writings served as a non-verbal and child-sensitive method that allowed participants to express their experiences and emotions at their own pace, without direct questions or pressure, providing a safe space for reflection in a more comfortable and open way (see also Janesick 1999, 2015; Hiemstra 2001). Humanitarian and governmental staff participated in 11 structured and semi-structured interviews, 1 person self-identifying as a woman and 10 as men, all Ugandan. The interviews were conducted using question guidelines, which were adjusted beforehand to focus on specific subject areas relevant to the participants' work and expertise (see also Fujii 2018; Roulston and Choi 2018).

Participatory observation and transect walks at both sites provided additional information important for the research. Transect walks combine mapping and discussing sites and serve to improve the research team's understanding of local conditions. Methodologically, these walks are rooted in urban planning, urban design, and developmental practice; in the past they have also been applied to return

migration (e.g., Kanstrup et al. 2014; Akanle and Olutayo 2012). Information is essentially gathered while walking together in the community with interlocutors and speaking about its features, resources, and different places and their respective meanings. Once the walks are over, maps are drawn and the relevant details noted down.

Our primary phase of data collection took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given its devastating global impact, we cannot disregard its effects entirely, and instead we seek to address the issues that have emerged. To this end, we incorporate the experiences of Gato Ndabaramiye Joshua, who continued to live in Uganda during the pandemic. Moreover, we draw on further research in which two qualitative questionnaires were carried out online in 2021 and 2022, focusing on the effects of the pandemic on refugees and their protection in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe (see Segadlo et al. 2021a, 2021b; de Jager et al. 2025). This research was part of a collaborative effort connected to the projects Forced Migration, Women – and Peace? Peacebuilding Practices of Women in Refugee Camps led by Ulrike Krause and Forced Displacement in Africa: The Politics and Stakeholders of Migration Governance led by Franzisca Zanker at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute in Freiburg. Both projects were independently funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research. A total of 90 respondents participated in 2021, with a slight decrease to 75 in 2022 (considering completed questionnaires). Among them, 14 were living in Uganda in 2021, and 31 in 2022, with 14 identifying as female (7 in 2021, 7 in 2022) and 31 as male (7 in 2021, 24 in 2022); no respondents identified as queer. With multiple responses possible, 25 respondents noted having lived experience of displacement (6 in 2021, 19 in 2022), 13 were aid workers (5 in 2021, 8 in 2022), 1 was from the media (in 2021), and 8 were academics (4 in 2021, 4 in 2022). While the limited sample size means the surveys were not representative, the responses still offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of displaced people and the impact of the pandemic on their lives. In this book, we draw on the findings concerning Uganda to address how the pandemic affected refugees, the challenges they faced, and the roles of their self-organizations.

Finally, we assessed the data gathered in Kampala and Kyaka II using qualitative data analysis following Kuckartz (2014) and employing the software MAXQDA, in a multi-stage process. Initially, we developed inductive categories based on the interlocutors' narratives and recurring themes, which highlighted the significance they place

on self-organization. This phase also revealed a range of additional topics shared by the interlocutors. Building on this foundation, we conducted a further analysis to create deductive categories, drawing on the concept of agency as outlined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) (see chapter 2). The analysis reveals that self-organization is central to agency and an integral part of it. A subsequent round of analysis was carried out to refine and summarize the findings, with the aim of identifying, organizing, and evaluating the key issues raised by the interlocutors. Moreover, the two qualitative questionnaires were analyzed in collaboration. On the one hand, we conducted a descriptive analysis to highlight overall trends among respondents and examine differences based on factors such as countries of origin, gender, and age. On the other hand, we employed qualitative content analysis to systematically identify key themes, patterns, and insights, allowing us to gain deeper understanding of the experiences of refugees and the impact of the pandemic on their lives.

Ethical Considerations

Before, during, and after data collection, ethical considerations remained of central importance to us. In addition to undergoing the ethics review of TASO IRC, we drew on the *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice* of the Refugee Studies Centre of the University of Oxford (Refugee Studies Centre 2007) and later also on the *Code of Ethics* of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM 2018) for general guidance.

Our point of departure was to design research that would be collaborative and participatory in nature, meaning not merely *about* displaced people but primarily *with* them. To this end, Krause discussed the research idea and design with existing contacts before applying for project funding. The design aimed to create as many opportunities for collaboration as possible. Our co-operation during data collection included workshops about the project's aims, methods, and ethical considerations. We collectively conducted Do No Harm analyses (see Krause 2017b) before, during, and after the research, seeking not only to avoid negative repercussions from it but also to proceed in a manner as ethically sensitive as possible. In these and other forums, our joint discussions resulted in adapting the research design and planned process. Since we strongly oppose the idea of refugees' volunteering in research without adequate compensation,

the Gerda Henkel Foundation's project funding was invaluable in enabling collaboration – although having a limited budget still set certain constrains.

With our approach, we broadly aim to work together by engaging in collaborative data collection, analysis, and writings, but also by promoting people's own research and publications and by sharing findings in jointly organizing panels at conferences and discussions at workshops. In doing so, we seek to support the localization of knowledge production and research partnerships widely stressed in debates (e.g., Doná 2007; Bradley 2008; Shuayb and Brun 2021; Shivakoti and Milner 2022; Reed and Schenck 2023) while being mindful of, and tackling, the challenges that can and do occur (e.g., Mestheneos 2011; Landau 2012; Clark-Kazak 2019; Kamwengo 2019; El Refaei 2020; Ntanyoma 2021; Tilley and Kalina 2021). The importance of such collaboration, and especially individuals' own analyses, is evident in the volume edited by Reed and Schenck (2023); drawing on Appadurai's (2006) emphasis of the "right to research" as part of democratic claims, the authors of the volume's various chapters illustrate how significant and enlightening the exercise of the right to research is. Correspondingly, we continue such joint efforts also by including reflections by people with lived experience of displacement in Kampala and Kyaka II in this book.

While collecting data with refugees in Kyaka II and Kampala, key ethical standards included ensuring informed consent and voluntary participation, for which we drew on the relational approach of Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway (2007, 306–12). This helped us to treat consent not as a bureaucratic issue of gaining participants' signatures on standardized consent forms, but instead as a process of continuous discussion about what exactly they are agreeing to, how we conduct the research, and the use of the data they kindly shared with us. This process helped us build open and trusting relationships over time. To ensure interlocutors' safety, we guaranteed the confidentiality of the information shared, including by saving data only on secure university servers. Interlocutors' safety came before research interests, and such concern extended to the ways in which collected data. In lieu of following a list of questions, we sought to stay "morally active" (Butler 2002, 245); we continuously assessed the situation we were in with interlocutors and used approaches such as ero-epic dialogues, transect walks, and journal writings that enable great openness and flexibility and contribute to nurturing safe

environments. It was important to us as a research team to respect limitations. This also means that we had "to leave some stones unturned," as Malkki (1995a, 51) stressed, respecting privacy rather than asking about all of the things we were potentially interested in.

Concerning anonymization, our work with refugees' self-organizations presents a specific case. We refer by name to several such organizations in the following chapters, but we do so only when respective decision makers explicitly consented to their organization being named. We wish to note that we not only spoke with self-organizations' decision makers and representatives but especially with a wide range of members, meaning those accessing what self-organizations provide; when quoting the latter, we do not refer to self-organizations by name. We spoke, further, with a number of individuals who explicitly wished for their personal names to be included in order to share their perspectives. Gerver (2013) also argues against "blanket anonymity" so interlocutors can have their stories heard publicly. After many debates among the team over the years, we decided against sharing names to add an additional layer of precaution and protection as we are aware of some instances in which not only these interlocutors, but also additional ones who did not explicitly wished to be named, could potentially be identified. All quotes or further information are marked by anonymized references in footnotes that include the person's self-identified gender, nationality, the method and date of data collection, and broad (but not concrete) location (i.e., Kyaka II or Kampala). This applies to references for interviews with government officials and aid workers too.

Particular considerations concerning anonymization arise with those individuals whose writings are included in the chapters. These are stories about refugee-led organizations, a poem, and refugees' reflections on their lived experiences. For all but two written pieces, the authors wished to be named. This is, of course, an ethical issue because their identities are immediately recognizable, which stands in contrast to our overarching anonymization principle. We spoke at length in the team and with the authors to weigh up reasons and ways to include their stories under their names, and potential future consequences of doing so. As a result of these discussions, the authors consented to focusing specifically on *their* stories and leaving out connections to other refugee-led organizations or individuals as far as possible in their reflections. Moreover, we collectively decided to include their writings in text boxes to highlight them in, but also separate them out from, our own analysis.

This leads to questions of how our writing process is also shaped by ethical considerations concerning who speaks and in what ways. On the one hand, writing is a hierarchical process as it is essentially us as authors who decide what is included and what is not. Over the course of the past few years, scholars have partly described our work as giving a voice to refugees at conferences and workshops – a labelling we strictly refute. We do not *give* people voices; they have and use them of their own volition clearly and loudly; we were merely fortunate to be able to listen to and speak with people and learn about their lived experiences and diverse perspectives. In this book, we bring the various narratives and reflections they shared with us together and analyze them.

To intensify our work *with* – instead of *about* – the people during the writing process, the coming chapters include the aforementioned contributions. By sharing displaced people's own writings, we complement our work with in-depth reflections on and analyses of everyday challenges as well as developments of self-organizations that can best be provided by those who know the conditions intimately. These writings are the poem *Just Because I'm a Refugee* by Bengekya Mugay Gédéon in chapter 3; *Reflections on the Refugee Entrepreneurship Association Limited (REAL)* by Noella Kabale in chapter 4; reflections on the *Difficult Experiences of Flight, Arrival, and Life in Uganda* by Paul*, on the *Hodari Foundation* by Janvier Hafasha, and on an *LGBTQ+ Refugee-Led Organization* by its Director in chapter 5;[13] and the *Reflection on KITAD, KRLON, and Business Entrepreneurship* by Isreal Katembo in chapter 6. We are endlessly thankful to be able to share their stories.

On the other hand, the hierarchical process of writing is also reflected in how issues are presented. Throughout this book – and in other publications – we seek to stay as close as possible to the information and wordings that interlocutors shared with us. To this end, we include many quotes. These are only lightly language-edited to correct potential errors, but we remain as faithful as possible to how interlocutors described matters. Moreover, as already evident in this introduction, we refer to those who took part in the research as *refugees*, *people with lived experiences of displacement*, *displaced people*, and, especially, simply *people*, *individuals*, or *interlocutors*. Language is power, and each of these terms carries weight – the refugee label with its specific connotations especially. We distance ourselves from

13 Research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

a legalistic approach and understand the term *refugee* as a relational analytical category. The essence is people's lived experiences of displacement and exile, and especially their situated knowledges of, perspectives on, and practices in self-organizations.

Finally, concerning the role of language, we deem it important to note that we are non-native English speakers. While we are committed to ensuring clarity and precision in our work, we must acknowledge the challenges of writing in a second language. The initial version of this manuscript was professionally carefully edited by James Powell, whose expertise greatly contributed to the refinement of our ideas. We are very grateful for his support. During the revision process, following the peer review, we occasionally utilized artificial intelligence tools, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT and the University of Münster's Chatbot UniGPT, to address language-related questions and enhance clarity. These tools were used not to generate text but solely to ensure the correctness of our writing. We retain full responsibility for the content and academic integrity of the work. In the final stages before publication, Ryan Perks carefully corrected the manuscript to ensure clarity and compliance with the publisher's style guidelines, and Tanya Izzard prepared the index with great accuracy and dedication. We are very thankful for their meticulous work and support.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

With our focus on the broad spectrum of self-organizations displaced people initiate, lead, maintain, and engage in within Uganda's Kyaka II and Kampala, we ultimately explore how they practise agency. This requires us to examine the effects of the contextual structures of Uganda's refugee regime on individuals and their agency, and especially the roles of their self-organization in everyday life. Our book reflects this analytical approach by dedicating chapters to the functioning and impacts of the regime, the political engagement of formalized self-organizations in the regime, the social embeddedness of individuals and self-organizations, and self-organized socio-economic practices and networks, alongside the introductory, conceptual, and concluding chapters.

Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical approach to relational agency from a gender-sensitive perspective, complemented by situated knowledge to centrally position refugees' lived experiences in our research. We thus outline how we operationalize and explore agency and situated

knowledge. Based on this framework, we delve into our conceptual approach to understanding refugees' self-organization. We detail our broad perspective on informal and formalized self-organizations, outline the thematic tendencies that they are revealed to have, and elaborate on the different structures that individuals develop, thus laying the foundations for the subsequent analyses.

Chapter 3 examines Uganda's refugee regime with its humanitarian, political, and legal structures imposed on refugees as well as the plights they face. This chapter provides essential contextual information for understanding the role and significance of self-organization explored in the later chapters. We look at how assistance is provided in camps – but not urban areas – and especially how the strategic objective of self-reliance is pursued. In Kampala, refugees are able to live relatively independent lives, but the lack of external aid structures complicates their conditions. In addition to diverse risks, the absence of formal support frequently leaves them in limbo. In Kyaka II, an aid apparatus arises in which various organizations deliver measures and exert control over refugees' lives. We outline the effects of this and the self-reliance approach and show that the prevailing economic and agricultural focus ultimately means promoting refugees' survivability. Moreover, government authorities and aid organizations use participatory approaches and thereby orchestrate involvement in refugee groups as part of their aid apparatus. We offer novel perspectives by disclosing how these imposed group structures are instrumentalized as humanitarian tools to achieve policy objectives – most of all regarding self-reliance. At times, aid organizations even co-opt the ideas and self-organizations that refugees pursue, thereby yielding power and influence over them. However, this certainly does not signify that individuals merely passively submit to this dominance; instead, they navigate and challenge Uganda's refugee regime – not least by means of their self-organizing.

Chapter 4 turns to the question of how formalized self-organizations represent actors in Uganda's refugee regime. Hence, contrary to the humanitarian use and instrumentalization of refugee groups, here we explore how independently functioning, formalized self-organizations provide crucial support. We outline the long-standing and multi-faceted related structures that self-organizations maintain in Kyaka II and Kampala and discuss the expertise they develop. Despite their vital work, insufficient funding was among the primary issues that most interlocutors involved herein would discuss. This affects the

degree of support they can provide and oftentimes leads to a tradition of volunteerism. To improve the situation, self-organizations pursue strategic collaboration not only with government authorities and aid organizations in Uganda and globally but also with other self-organizations, establishing broader networks to increase their impact. Yet, co-operation is not without its issues; leadership struggles and competition can arise. We conclude that through their important work, formalized self-organizations are highly visible and well recognized in communities and thus ultimately represent actors in Uganda's refugee regime – yet they are rarely acknowledged as such by government authorities and aid organizations.

Chapter 5 examines the social embeddedness of individuals and self-organizations. Here, we address both informal and formalized entities and reveal that self-organizations are the first responders in cases of emergency and key providers in everyday life in exile. We explore the precarious conditions of newly arriving people in Kyaka II and Kampala and show how individuals and self-organizations provide much-needed material and immaterial support. We then turn to life in the camp and the city, reflecting how individuals use mobilities strategically and collectively, shape neighbourhoods, and thereby build shared spaces of belonging and support in which they feel comfortable. Depicted in this chapter are both the forms and core social effects of such self-organizing. Moreover, we discuss how self-organizations become sources of not only safety and well-being, but also of risks and burdens for individuals. Here, we turn our attention to the most fundamental forms of self-organizing, that of families and friends, but we also elaborate on the roles of broader formalized organizations. We reflect on the great importance that interlocutors ascribed to care for families and especially children, but also the struggles they frequently experienced in family collectives, including gender-based and intimate-partner violence. This applies similarly to friendship circles, which represent key self-organized safety nets but can also become risky collectives. Formalized self-organizations provide crucial support structures offering assistance in such situations of need.

Based on that, chapter 6 addresses people's socio-economic entanglements and their self-organizing. We discuss how they cope with the various hardships and limitations encountered, primarily their economic struggles, via individual and especially collective strategies in Kyaka II and Kampala alike. Informal and formalized self-organizations

have central roles economically, whether by individuals being part of trade networks, offering services to others, being members of savings groups, or attending vocational-training courses. As a result, we argue that the social embeddedness of economic practices is evident in the way individuals and self-organizations function as risk mitigators, experts, and reinforcing catalysts. By providing (socio-)economic support, individuals and self-organizations counter threats arising in emergencies. Due to the knowledges they acquire, they become important sources of information, and well-established economic practices can influence opportunities to others as reinforcing catalysts. Despite the wide range of positive effects stemming from collective actions, negative consequences can still ensue. We thus close the chapter by discussing how people can be confronted by dangerous and unsustainable work environments as well as risky economic practices related to self-organized social collectives.

Chapter 7 summarizes the key findings presented in the book and offers critical reflections on recent developments in Uganda and globally. We explore the roles of self-organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic and question the widespread idea that its circumstances would now make their work visible. We then turn to the narrative of self-organizations apparently closing the gaps left by the regime; while this is certainly the case in Kampala and Kyaka II, we address the implications of this neoliberal argument being adopted – or hijacked – by government authorities and aid organizations in Uganda and globally. We hence examine the prevailing issue that self-organizations are still not taken seriously and address the risks stemming from their being treated in tokenistic ways not only by authorities but also by other self-organizations. However, much has happened in recent years, as self-organizations have demanded to be heard and have been driving change in protection systems at the global level.

2

"We Combined Our Efforts"

Approaching Refugees' Self-Organization Through the Concept of Agency

Although Uganda is lauded for its progressive refugee regime, its restrictive humanitarian aid structures, political and legal limitations, economic constraints, social marginalization, prevalent risks of gender-based violence, and long-term uncertainties concerning the future pose significant problems for refugees in the country (e.g., Ilcan et al. 2015; Kwiringira et al. 2018; Sebba and Zanker 2022; Ruzibiza and Berckmoes 2022; Grześkowiak 2024). This holds true for people seeking asylum all over the world. Displacement due to persecution, violent conflict, lack of livelihoods and other dangers, the long and perilous journeys in search of safety, as well as the restrictions, risks, and uncertainties in exile frequently mean that people are exposed to a myriad of challenges and adversities, having to navigate a tightrope of difficult conditions (e.g., Adhikari 2013; Meda 2017; Sung 2023; Agier 2011; Jaji 2012; Koizumi and Hoffstaedter 2015).

Such extensive difficulties worldwide have prompted political and humanitarian discourses to dominantly depict refugees as victims in dire need of external protection. Vulnerability has turned into the seemingly decisive category, which not only identifies those most at risk requiring aid (e.g., Freedman 2019; Hassouri 2021; Welfens and Bekyol 2021; Moreno-Lax and Vavoula 2024) but is paradoxically also central to the promotion of refugees' self-reliance and resilience (Krause and Schmidt 2020). The focus on the "refugee-as-victim" (Turner 2010, 49–50) ultimately objectifies, pathologizes, and depoliticizes refugees, portraying them as "vulnerable protection objects" (Krause 2021, 110) in need of a humanitarian protector or even a humanitarian saviour (Benslama-Dabdoub 2024). We are by no means the first scholars to criticize such problematic political and

humanitarian labelling. For many years now, scholars have lamented how aid is imposed on refugees (Harrell-Bond 1986), camps become sites of "human warehousing" (Jaji 2012, 227), and refugees are seen as "innocent victims, stripped of political subjectivity" (Turner 2010, 155), "incapacitated children" (Malkki 1995a, 11), or "undesirable" (Agier 2011, 19) – ultimately depriving them of agency.

However, displaced people do not passively submit to such imposed labels and structural conditions. Instead, the legal, political, economic, social, and other difficulties they face demand their constant coping, negotiation, and adaptation, essentially reflecting ways in which refugees exercise their agency. Over the course of the past decades, a growing body of research has emerged in which scholars challenge the top-down victimizing discourses and emphasize refugees' agency (for literature reviews, see Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012; Gladden 2012; Seguin and Roberts 2017). In the recent volume *Refugees' Roles in Resolving Displacement and Building Peace: Beyond Beneficiaries*, edited by Bradley, Milner, and Peruniak (2019), the chapters highlight how refugees, as agents, shape their political and socio-economic predicaments in ways that extend beyond formally constituted and registered organizations, including in the pursuit of durable solutions and peace (see also Ayoub and Bauman 2019; Edler et al. 2024, 2025). Moreover, scholars explore how individuals perceive and contest the oftentimes degrading labelling of refugees (e.g., Clark-Kazak 2014; Krause 2016b; Vigil and Baillie Abidi 2018; Tewolde 2020; Kaga 2021), and how they cope with dangers and precarious living conditions in exile (e.g., Al-Modallal 2012; Thomson 2013; Oka 2014; Krause and Schmidt 2018; Krause and Gato 2019; Ruzibiza and Berckmoes 2022). Also addressed is how displaced people contribute to local economies (e.g., Golooba-Mutebi 2004; Oka 2011; Alloush et al. 2017; Betts, Bloom, et al. 2017; Schmidt 2019), involve themselves in justice (e.g., Holzer 2013; Ntegyerize and Onyoin 2016; Jacobs and Kyamusugulwa 2017), and build structures of self-representation and leadership nationally and internationally (e.g., Inhetveen 2010; Lenette et al. 2020; Bochmann 2021; Dinbabo et al. 2021).

Besides individual practices, scholars reflect on the roles of refugees' social networks and more recently their self-organizations. The latter debates have increased in prominence since the mid-2010s. As outlined in chapter 1, respective studies address the diverse support that these self-organizations provide worldwide, be it regarding social affairs, integration, economic livelihoods, general well-being and health, or

access to rights and services (e.g., Griffiths et al. 2005; Sharif 2018; Brown 2018; Feischmidt et al. 2019; Mayblin and James 2019; Meret and Diener 2019; Gonzalez Benson 2017, 2020a, 2020b; Bahram 2020; Odugbesan and Schwiertz 2020; Pincock et al. 2020; Dinbabo et al. 2021; Gidron and Carver 2022; Lau 2021; Mencutek 2021; Wilkins 2021; Nungsari and Chuah 2022; Kara et al. 2022; Richlen 2022a, 2022b, 2023; El Abed et al. 2023; Kirsch et al. 2023; Diab et al. 2024).

Despite this growing literature on refugees' agency and self-organization, we see two distinct fields that require further analytical attention. On the one hand, many political, legal, economic, social, and other actions and strategies explored in the agency literature are not limited to the individual but are inherently tied to collective endeavours. Although these collective meanings are partly mentioned or analyzed, the literature on refugees' agency and that on self-organization still run as parallel streams and require deeper integration. Hence, more research is needed to better understand the dynamics of agency in and for collective actions, and specifically the indispensable roles that informal and formalized self-organizations play. We seek to contribute to this coalescence in this book and will show how individuals come together, actively engaging in and driving collective action and support within and through their self-organizations.

On the other hand, research in forced migration studies has largely focused on positive views on agency, highlighting how displaced people are able to cope with and navigate challenges with resourcefulness and problem-solving skills. However, as Golubović argues in her work *Beyond Agency as Good*, "the recognition of refugee agency has rarely been extended to consider the darker qualities that agency also permits, such as responsibility, guilt, or complicity in acts of violence" (2022, 1345). We share her critique and see similar tendencies in research about refugees' self-organization. To avoid such a tendency in our analyses, we not only examine individuals' collective actions specifically in self-organization for helpful, supportive, protective, and similar causes, but also consider how this intersects with ambivalence and may involve pursuing perilous pathways and even taking risky actions in exile.

Building on these critical reflections, this chapter introduces the theoretical approach to relational agency following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), which provides the analytical lens for examining the multi-faceted meanings of refugees' self-organization. By

complementing agency with situated knowledge, we aim to foreground the lived experiences of refugees and the meanings they ascribe to collectives. This analytical framework leads into the conceptual understanding of refugees' self-organization as both a practice and an institution. Moreover, insights from interlocutors reveal a broad spectrum of self-organizations, which range from informal to formalized ones.

REFUGEES' SELF-ORGANIZATION AS AGENCY

Refugees' self-organization that we were able to witness and interact with in Uganda is evidently highly diverse, with individuals mobilizing various forms of material and immaterial resources collectively. Whether creating and drawing on comfort and belonging in close social circles, strategizing economic trade networks, or mobilizing and offering humanitarian assistance in emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals come together and lead, maintain, engage in, use, and benefit – or are also excluded – from collectives. The comprehensive developments that interlocutors shared with us have in common that individuals with lived experiences of displacement and exile unite in their actions, and they are the ones who set the agenda and decide about the actions they want to pursue in, for, or through collectives. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on how individuals, despite their very different experiences of displacement as well as arrival and life in Uganda, exercise agency and develop similar yet diverse approaches of self-organization in order to better understand their practices, meanings, and also challenges in everyday life.

Social, behavioural, psychological, and economic researchers have long been seeking to better understand and conceptualize ways in which individuals possess the ability to act, influence their environment, navigate social constraints, and essentially embody what is frequently framed as agency. However, the notion of agency continues to be criticized as vague, elusive, and slippery, or even problematic due to risks of reproducing biases (e.g., Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Campbell 2009; Squire 2017). Over the past decades, a growing number of theoretical approaches to agency have been developed, prominently including those by Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1986), Emirbayer and Mische (1998), or Archer (1996, 2003), with a central focus on the relation of agency with structure (see also Dépelteau 2008; Bakewell 2010; Squire 2017).

Relational Agency as Theoretical Framework

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) specifically focus on the relational element of agency drawing on their work about networks. While they also theoretically capture agency in relation to actors and structures, they offer an approach that allows us to thoroughly consider the temporal and social embeddedness of agency. Agency generally refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently, make choices, and use strategies to achieve their goals, but their actions can also be unintended. Actors' practices are "informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963). This is inherently connected to structures, which represent the basis and result of social action as actors continually produce and reproduce structures. Structures can thus limit actors' agency, but actors can also shape and change structures through their agency.

As such, individuals are socially embedded and agency "centers around the engagement (and disengagement) by actors of the different contextual environments that constitute their own structured yet flexible social universes" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 973). Agency is thereby not exclusively located in individuals; on the contrary, it is deeply socially embedded and hence represents various forms of social organization. Such relationality is also emphasized by other scholars approaching agency with a view on situatedness, social context, or cultural traditions, for example (e.g., Ikuenobe 2015; Burkitt 2016; Abbott 2020). The social entanglement is crucial for our research as it not only enables but forces us to acknowledge both the collective as well as the individual aspect of agency. The relational perspective thus emphasizes the inherent ties of autonomous individuals to their social relatedness. In this view, individuals exercise agency in relation to others; it is through their interactions with other people and the wider social environment that individuals are able to act. Such a relational outline challenges individualistic views and offers ways to consider the interplay between personal capacities, social context, and power dynamics.

Tied to relationality, Emirbayer and Mische emphasize the temporality of agency – the interplay between past habits, present calculations, and future orientations in shaping actions. They outline

three interconnected dimensions: the iterational dimension, addressing the role of past experiences and habitual patterns in shaping present actions; the projective dimension, focusing on the imaginative construction of future possibilities; and the practical-evaluative dimension, reflecting the ability to make situational judgments and adapt to immediate circumstances. This "chordal triad of agency" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 970) illustrates how individuals dynamically engage with the past, present, and future within overlapping temporal contexts. This framework shows how agency enables both the reproduction and transformation of social structures through creative and contextually informed actions. The temporality of agency provides us with a lens for analyzing how individuals and their self-organizing efforts navigate complex circumstances, draw on past experiences, and make strategic choices addressing immediate needs and pursuing long-term aims for themselves and their communities.

Actors' relational-temporal embeddedness also means that patterns of action, social rules, and norms learned in the past all shape current practices, with actors having the competence to match these with their projecting of expectations and desires regarding the future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). Through social evaluation in interaction, agency thus depends on co-operation, understanding (or the will to understand), and on incorporation into counterparts' plans of action. This means, however, that those who find themselves living under uncertain conditions – where routines are disrupted – have to adapt and find new solutions. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 1009) state, this can have a productive effect since actors may encounter resistance to their usual practices and as a result become "pioneers" by prompting the emergence of new contexts for action. Here we see that self-organization is both an institution and a practice. On the one hand, people found and manage self-organizations as an institution or body where pioneering becomes formalized, and on the other, they mobilize themselves and collective initiatives for various purposes through the practice of self-organization.

Despite the significance of the relationality of agency, Emirbayer and Mische are criticized for not critically engaging with power relations in their theoretical framework. Burkitt (2018, 534) argues that their separation of contextual structure from agency as stemming from self-dynamics would risk isolating the self from its relational context. And yet, Emirbayer and Mische's relational and temporal approach reveals that individuals' experiences are deeply embedded in, and

inseparable from, contextual structures, highlighting the relational understanding of agency. The question of power nonetheless remains crucial, especially in our work, as people with lived experience of displacement are confronted with structural inequalities and constraints in exile that profoundly shape their agency. We therefore inherently consider power dynamics not merely as limitations for displaced people, but especially also in terms of how they contest, challenge, circumvent, or navigate these structures – particularly through self-organization.

Using agency theory, we encounter four distinct areas of caution in our research. Firstly, since we are working with marginalized actors living in difficult conditions in exile, this interpretation of the relationship between agency and structure has to be carefully balanced. Due to lived experiences and realities being shaped by precarities, challenges, and marginalized positions, surrounding structures of Uganda's refugee regime appear to be especially dominant and constraining (on precarities and agency, see also Paret and Gleeson 2016). However, empirically ignoring people's even small room for manoeuvre means stripping them epistemologically of their agency – and reproducing the victimizing and passive notions that have been criticized for years (Turner 2010; Agier 2011; Krause and Schmidt 2020). In humanitarian and political discourses, such victimization along with ascriptions of vulnerability is highly gendered (Freedman 2019; Turner 2019; Ruzibiza and Berckmoes 2022; Held 2023; Benslama-Dabdoub 2024), and is contradicted by descriptions of refugees as threats – also in gendered forms (Olivius 2016; Gray and Franck 2019; Jaji and Krause 2024). In turn, designating the humanitarian, political, and legal structures as determining forces plays down actors' capabilities and furthermore adds to the process of victimization and marginalization. Overemphasizing their capabilities, conversely, can lead to the neglect, disregard, or downplaying of the precarious structures that complicate displaced people's lives and scope for endeavour.

Analyzing agency is, therefore, a delicate matter. For our research, we focus on refugees' individual and collective practices of self-organizing and approach Uganda's refugee regime as core contextual structures. Self-organization often intersects and aligns with these structures – sometimes explicitly. However, even in these intersections, relational agency remains key, as people incorporate these structures into their expectations and evaluations of their situational possibilities, while also creating social structures via self-organization. We thus contextualize

the diverse forms of self-organization within the context of the regime and the social structures in Kyaka II and Kampala to examine the crucial roles the collectives play in people's everyday lives.

Secondly, focusing on refugees' agency – whether individually or collectively – bears the risk of centring on intentional actions, or interpreting actions as such, and insufficiently recognizing and considering the structural limitations, societal pressures, and unintended consequences that shape their experiences and decisions. Squire (2017) also cautions about the agency/structure framework that "intentionality risks reproducing assumptions about subjects" (2017, 254). We share her concern, and also reject intentionality as a necessary condition for agency, and focus on everyday practices that are often based on routines rather than intentions. Such practices are so common that they are frequently ignored in research. However, everyday agency is key during conflict, flight, and life in exile (Mainwaring 2016; Schmidt 2023; Kanal and Rottmann 2021); the practices constitute the fabric of refugees' daily lives and reveal various actions of adaptation, resistance, coping, compliance, resignation, withdrawal, moving on, and navigating uncertainties. As such, individuals are not necessarily or always intentionally changing their circumstances but are also dealing and interacting with them. In order to be able to stay as close and true to interlocutors' narratives and thus outlined practices, we focus on their lived experiences and situated knowledge (more below).

Thirdly, the challenging conditions in exile – including the abovementioned political and legal restrictions, lack of livelihoods, prevalent risks of violence, and diverse uncertainties – harshly shape the lives and experiences of displaced people and thus also influence how they practise agency. Finding and establishing ways for improvement is frequently the primary driver for their actions, but this does not mean that agency solely reflects *good* or constructive practices. To avoid idealizing and romanticizing individuals' agency and self-organization, we also consider the "darker qualities that agency also permits" (Golubović 2022, 1345). This involves exploring the struggles and competitions individuals face for their formalized self-organization, the challenges and risks of violence that arise in informal self-organization, and the dangerous economic practices they have to engage in for survival.

Fourthly, due to our analysis of refugees' self-organization, we have to carefully balance the relationship between the individual and the

collective. We seek to avoid any collectivizing and homogenizing notion of people being a supposedly *natural community* or a *group of groups*, therefore juggling astutely the focus on collectives and on the role of the individuals establishing, maintaining, and contributing to, but potentially also being excluded from, them. For that, we not only consider how people engage in a wide scope of collective actions as a form of agency (Cleaver 2007; Piacentini 2008; Edström et al. 2016) but are also particularly interested in individuals' social structures. We thus explore people's social positionings and abilities to act individually and collectively, applying a gender-sensitive approach that enables us to further address variations and developments. Moreover, we pay careful attention to the limiting or even risky effects that self-organized collectives can have on individuals and their abilities to act.

Complementing Agency with a Gender-Sensitive Approach and Situated Knowledge

To cautiously and consciously handle these dilemmas in the chapters ahead, people's own narratives about their lived experiences, various strategies, and embeddedness in structures is central. The latter means that patterns of action, social rules, and norms learned in the past shape current practices, with actors having the capacity to match these with their projecting of expectations and desires regarding the future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). Yet, people's past and current experiences, their contemporary actions with the future in mind, and social embeddedness can differ drastically. The ability to exercise agency is therefore informed by one's resources, past experiences, present positionings, and future aspirations. As such, agency is relational given that one's social (inter)actions shape both it and structures, which requires reflecting people's lived experiences within their social situatedness. We use a gender-sensitive approach to consider and explore people's social positionings and abilities to act collectively in Kyaka II and Kampala. We generally understand gender as a social category, one not naturally constituted and static, but rather the result of dynamic social construction (e.g., West and Zimmerman 1987; Hawkesworth 2013). Gender shapes identities, experiences, actions, social positions, and relations, being constitutive also of social hierarchies and structures; it is thus intertwined with agency (e.g., McNay 2004, 2013; Castañeda and Pfeffer 2018; Risman 2018).

Approaching agency from a gender-sensitive perspective enables us to question actors' roles and opportunities, and how they relate to surrounding structures; the ways in which patriarchal norms and rules affect people's actions and self-organizing; and the social relations and embeddedness of those concerned. In other words, it allows us to explore individuals' actions as agency – contextually constituted by past gender-specific experiences and patterns of practice, as well as by the structures that surround them and shape how they look to the future. As an important part of collective strategies, we examine a broad spectrum of self-organizations from informal to formalized, paying careful attention to who their leaders, representatives, and members are, and which gendered political, social, and economic challenges self-organizations encounter. And yet, we must re-emphasize an unfortunate shortcoming in the research. The political developments surrounding the Anti-Homosexuality Acts along with the growing challenges in Uganda did not allow for comprehensive research with LGBTQ+ refugees.[1] To the extent made possible by the data, we delve into the viewpoints, experiences, and self-organization efforts of queer refugees in the chapter ahead.

Placing interlocutors' lived experiences at the core necessitates taking seriously that "agency entails different ways of experiencing the world" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 973). This focus essentially involves individuals' knowledges, encounters, and aspirations, which is implied in the temporal relationality of actor's past experiences, present practices, and future intentions. To conceptually grasp lived experiences, we draw on the notion of situated knowledge. As such, we understand experiences not merely as a purely reactive concept of past recollections, but as a lived and thus active process of continuous engagements with the past, present, and future, shaping one's perceptions – as situated knowledge – and actions – as agency. Foucault argues that locally situated "knowledge that people have" is often "subjugated" within the hegemonic context, yet it represents "a particular knowledge" ([1997] 2004, 7–8). Haraway (1988) follows feminist thought and apprehends situated knowledge as embodied, relying on and stemming from positionings, yet extending beyond individuals by being about communities. Collins (2000) also stresses social and political embeddedness of knowledges in her work on Black

1 As noted in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

feminist thought, asserting that knowledges are not static but dynamic, as power asymmetries and subsequent experiences can also change (Collins 2000, 25).

We follow such debates by reflecting on the situated knowledges and lived experiences that displaced people have individually, yet also share collectively, acknowledging how these are influenced by the surrounding structures, social worlds, and developments. Lived experiences thus ultimately refer to individuals' first-hand accounts, perceptions, and impressions of their life events, social interactions, and contextual environments. While their experiences are shaped by the past and present, they also incorporate the future as individuals navigate toward hopes or goals. Yet, it would be utopian to assume that we can capture and analyze interlocutors' knowledges in their entirety and complexity. Instead, we concentrate on "situated bits of knowledge" inspired by Elorduy (2021, 20), which we understand as certain bodies or stocks of knowledges. In doing so, we acknowledge that interlocutors do not and cannot share everything – nor should they – and that we cannot and must not include all of their information in this book, partly because disclosing it could put interlocutors or others at risk, and partly because some details go beyond this book's focus.

In essence, adopting relational agency theory from a gender-sensitive perspective, complemented with situated knowledge as an analytical framework, facilitates the dissection of the various layers of actions, aspirations, and meanings that characterize refugees' self-organization in Uganda. It illuminates the ways in which refugees, through their engagement in self-organization, exercise agency by navigating comprehensive and gender-specific constraints, seizing opportunities, shaping their futures, and forging pathways of collective support. Analyzing the actions undertaken for and through self-organization reveals how the initiatives are informed by refugees' gender-specific past experiences, present considerations, and future aspirations, and how they are deeply embedded in social relations. As such, self-organization embodies a web of social relations that individuals are part of and that they actively create, maintain, and use. This reflects self-organization as both a practice – the dynamic, day-to-day actions of individuals coming together for mutual aid – and an institution – the structured, enduring systems that emerge from these practices. Furthermore, an agency-centric perspective necessitates reflections on the challenges that self-organizations, and especially individuals, face in exerting agency, particularly concerning gender inequalities. It

compels us to consider the broader implications, and thus limitations, of refugee-led initiatives. Examining the hurdles individuals encounter through, for, and in self-organization, and the strategies they employ to overcome these, leads to a nuanced understanding of refugees' everyday life in exile.

Overall, employing agency theory, gender-sensitive perspective, and situated knowledge in researching refugees' self-organization not only enriches the comprehension of the dynamic interplay between individual agency and collective action but also underscores the importance of recognizing refugees as actors. This perspective facilitates insight into how refugees' self-organization is socially embedded and challenges the broader socio-political landscape.

FRAMING REFUGEES' SELF-ORGANIZATION

Our point of departure in research is the analysis of how refugees practise agency and cope with the restrictive and precarious conditions encountered in Uganda, and, most importantly, what roles their self-organizations as social collectives play in that. A fundamental underlying question is how should the self-organized collectives be best framed? This quandary intensified during research in Uganda as interlocutors used a diverse array of terms to describe them, including "group," "initiative," "organization," "network," "co-operative," and also "self-organization" and "refugee-led organization."[2] The question of how to capture these collectives while staying as true to interlocutors' approaches still accompanies our research as we finalize these pages.

The body of research about refugees' self-organization has been growing steadily in recent years, with scholars focusing on an institutional notion of self-organization. They have also used a wide variety of concepts to address and analyze such entities. To name just a few, these include refugee community organizations (Griffiths et al. 2005; Lau 2021; Mencutek 2021; Richlen 2022a, 2023); refugee-led community-based organizations (Nungsari and Chuah 2022);

2 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II; response to a qualitative questionnaire by a woman, 28 January 2021; man, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II; man, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; three men, discussion, 8 December 2016, Kampala.

self-organizations (Odugbesan and Schwiertz 2020); refugee and asylum-seeker organizations (Dinbabo et al. 2021); refugee third sector organizations (Mayblin and James 2019); immigrant- and refugee-led community-based ethnic organizations (Kirsch et al. 2023); refugee-run grassroots organizations (Gonzalez Benson 2020a, 2020b); and, especially recently, refugee-led organizations (Sharif 2018; Torfa 2019; Pincock et al. 2020; Kara et al. 2022; El Abed et al. 2023; Diab et al. 2024).

We have ourselves been working with additional concepts over the course of the past several years. For example, the research project this book is based on is entitled Global Refugee Protection and Local Refugee Engagement: Scope and Limits of the Agency of Refugee-Led Community-based NGOs. As the project title indicates, our exploration starts with agency and the social roles of organizations that refugees are leading, ones that are non-governmental and furthermore based within certain community structures (see also Krause 2019a, 2019b; Krause and Schmidt 2019). This focus was the result of insights gleaned in prior research and work with displaced people in Uganda and elsewhere. It showed the values of the different social constellations that serve specific purposes for communities, such as elders, women's and religious groups, and adult-learning collectives – particularly in response to risks of gender-based violence (e.g., Krause 2016b, 2016c, 2021).

While our interest in agency, social relations, and these entities' ties to communities has remained central over the years, interlocutors' shared information and experiences gradually revealed that refugees' collectives frequently go beyond limited community structures – for example, by forming part of regional or even transnational support systems or economic networks. Whether locally limited or more wide-ranging, the conversation partners demonstrated clearly that self-organized collectives are highly diverse and serve various roles for individuals.

Characteristics and Broad Spectrum of Refugees' Self-Organizations

In order to capture and reflect on the diverse ways in which refugees exercise agency through, for, and in collectives, we adopt a broad perspective. As common fundamental characteristics, individuals who self-identify as refugees initiate, lead, and shape their own collectives, and these thus represent self-organized collectives with and for other

refugees. This distinction is crucial as we also encountered cases of collectives of refugees that were established, governed, and significantly shaped by government and aid organizations. Core examples are refugee committees and Refugee Welfare Councils, which we address in chapter 3. Due to the force of external actors, we do not consider these as self-organized collectives.

The core characteristics of refugees' leadership, self-mobilization, involvement, and own agenda setting guide us to predominantly frame the collectives as refugee-led organizations and self-organizations. These features are also reflected in UNHCR's recently endorsed definition of refugee-led organizations: "An organization or group in which persons with direct lived experience of forced displacement play a primary leadership role and whose stated objectives and activities are focused on responding to the needs of refugees and/or related communities" (2023). This definition was not developed by UNHCR alone, but "builds on consultations with organizations led by displaced and stateless persons, NGOs and academics; it was then field-tested by RLOs [refugee-led organizations] in 14 country operations" (UNHCR 2023). However, Harley rightly criticizes these problematic consultations, as "UNHCR never established a public and transparent process for input into the development of this definition, despite commitments to involve refugees inclusively in all decisions that affect them," thus ultimately excluding many refugee-led organizations (2023, 4). Moreover, this chosen framework does not capture the diversity of organizational forms, which another definition by the Global Refugee-Led Network, proposed for an UNHCR ExCom session, does instead. It similarly highlights the importance of their self-driven founding and management, noting that "Refugee-led organizations/initiatives are organizations which are founded and/or led by those with lived refugee experience, and may include both formal, registered organizations and informal initiatives" (Global Refugee-Led Network 2022).

The latter's inclusion of both formal and informal entities is central to our research too. We do not limit our focus to particular organizational structures (e.g., registered ones); by taking a broader perspective, we seek instead to include the various forms and types of self-organization that people in Uganda spoke of. These range from community-based, locally limited, informal groups and associations such as networks of family members, friends, and neighbours, to semi-structured versions such as savings groups or religious and cultural collectives, to formalized and thus established organizations

with defined responsibilities, internal hierarchies, and strategic objectives that in part constitute registered NGOs in Uganda.

While the above two definitions by UNHCR and the Global Refugee-Led Network concentrate on refugee-led organizations, we use the terms *refugee-led organizations* and *refugees' self-organizations* synonymously. As indicated in the introduction, we tend to use *self-organizations* more often due to the dual significance the term carries: First, self-organization as an institutional entity that refugees establish and lead; second, as a practice through which they exercise agency, mobilize, and engage in collective initiatives to various ends. Hence, by acknowledging both the institutional and the practice dimensions, the term *self-organizations* more accurately captures the multi-faceted ways in which refugees organize themselves, engage in joint actions, develop entities to address challenges, and pursue goals, compared to refugee-led organizations. Nevertheless, the latter places emphasis on leadership and refugees' own management of organizational bodies, which we do not wish to downplay. In consequence, both designations are employed throughout the book.

Individuals are at the heart of all endeavours. Self-organization – understood as a practice and an institution – ultimately consists of individuals creating value and both giving and receiving support via self-organizations. This may appear to be a given, and thus not worth mentioning again. However, as noted earlier, the mere concentration on groups or organizations risks homogenizing individuals in collectives. This is also reflected by Piacentini (2012), who criticizes the impact of the label *refugee* here. We fully agree with her; yet the term is still used throughout the book as we seek to stay as close to the information, narratives, and descriptions that conversation partners shared. They used the term repeatedly, framing collectives as self-organizations and especially also as refugee-led organizations.[3]

To counter a tendency toward uniform descriptions, we thus focus on the central roles of people in and for self-organizations and emphasize how the latter are essentially indicative of individuals practising agency and drawing on the power of community: They come together

3 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, discussion, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

and contribute to or even ensure their safety, assistance, well-being, economic prospects, and ultimately their lives in exile individually and collectively. Individual strategies and collective mechanisms are hence inherently intertwined, with people engaging individually in collective measures; self-organizations can only provide support when a number of individuals are committed to them.

Focus Areas of Refugees' Self-Organizations

These self-organizations span a great array of fields. Interlocutors detailed numerous ways through which their self-organization shapes their everyday lives, helps them cope and mitigate challenges, contributes to livelihoods, and offers a safety net, be it through the support of a neighbourhood collective when the house of an elderly woman collapsed;[4] social initiatives providing safety nets and spheres of relief and trust in times of emergency but also everyday life;[5] savings groups stepping up when an individual fell ill, was hospitalized, and needed funds for treatment, or when they found themselves unable to cater to their immediate needs such as food and rent;[6] community or religious enterprises opening their doors when someone needed short-term shelter and support;[7] self-organized educational and economic endeavours providing language classes or vocational training;[8] self-help groups offering protection and peer counselling;[9] self-organizations

4 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 July 2017, Kyaka II.
5 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from Burundi, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
6 E.g., discussion with three women and two men, 23 June 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.
7 E.g., woman from Eritrea, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
8 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.
9 E.g., discussion with three men and two women from DR Congo, 17 July 2017, Kampala; discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

giving legal assistance as well as engaging in advocacy to claim rights and improve the lives of refugees more broadly.[10]

Through their self-organization, refugees both tackle issues and challenges reactively as well as initiate and contribute to change proactively. That there is not one distinct form of refugee-led organization serving only one specific objective, but rather various types and support areas that exist simultaneously, is also indicated in research. Scholars refer to a range from informal groups to social networks, self-help initiatives, cultural groups, religious collectives, politically oriented youth groups, community centres, savings groups, and refugee-led registered NGOs – again, to just name some examples (e.g., Zetter et al. 2005; MacKenzie et al. 2012; Lacroix et al. 2015; Lyytinen 2017; Feischmidt et al. 2019; Gonzalez Benson 2020a; Pincock et al. 2020; Odugbesan and Schwiertz 2020; Dinbabo et al. 2021; Easton-Calabria and Hakiza 2021; Gidron and Carver 2022; Lau 2021; Kara et al. 2022; Richlen 2022a; El Abed et al. 2023).

Following interlocutors' insights, the primary motivation or reason for their self-organizing – whether deliberate or born out of urgent necessity – is mutual support and the pragmatic need to work together. Despite the complexity, the areas that informal and formalized self-organizations focus on can broadly be distinguished as social welfare (e.g., self-help groups, community collectives, religious associations); economic support (e.g., livelihood or agricultural collectives, savings groups, organizations offering vocational training or other educational initiatives); safety and security (e.g., neighbourhood associations, legal counselling, advocacy groups).

Not only people's motives for self-organizing but also the effects of self-organization on others are complex and intertwined; seeking to contribute to their own well-being and secure livelihoods, for example, cannot be strictly subdivided into economic, social, cultural, or safety issues. Self-organizations thus turn out to be interdependent. The case of savings groups is a prime example here given that, despite their obvious economic relevance, they also have a strong social component in being used to create spaces and feelings of comfort, support, and belonging. Burial groups and the subsequent care and assistance people provide and receive as members thereof are another.

10 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.

Furthermore, this overview reveals the inherent link between self-organization and the precarious structural context. Interlocutors explained that they primarily self-organize in order to confront the daily challenges they encounter and to contribute to filling the gaps in care that Uganda's refugee regime leaves unaddressed – or even the problems this restrictive regime creates. Such issues were widely remarked on, being ones that can hardly be tackled by individuals alone.[11] Hence they strategize, mobilize, use available resources, as well as leverage legal avenues mainly in interaction with other refugees, with the collectives providing important sources of information and experience as well as paving the way for joint actions. Such strategies can be immediate and ad hoc, develop and be maintained over time, stem from past experiences, and located in everyday routines.

Finally, refugees' self-organizations serve not only to support individual and collective efforts to reactively cope with existing challenges but also to initiate and bring about change proactively. This is directed at improving the living conditions of people within the community but also at contributing to structural shifts. Concerning the latter, interlocutors rarely spoke about public strategies – such as broader campaigns or protests to bring about much-needed change. Instead, they reflected more on subversive ones – for example, those aimed at collectively navigating the regime imposed on them, building parallel support structures, or continuously trying to initiate discussions with decision makers.[12] As a result, we will show in chapter 4 that especially formalized self-organizations embody central actors in Uganda's refugee regime and aid apparatus, but have thus far rarely been acknowledged as such.

INTRODUCING THE SPECTRUM OF SELF-ORGANIZATION IN UGANDA

To identify informal as well as formalized types of self-organization in Uganda, we did not use clear-cut benchmarks but relied, rather, on

11 E.g., woman from Somalia, dialogue, 25 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 February 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 June 2017, Kyaka II.

12 E.g., discussion with five men, 7 July 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.

the information that interlocutors themselves shared with us. Hence, refugees' own experiences, perceptions, and perspectives are decisive. Based on that, informal types of self-organization primarily represent community-based and fairly small collectives that can emerge on an ad hoc basis and be maintained over time. Formalized self-organizations are, meanwhile, strategically established, and have distinct internal decision-making structures. This approach helps illuminate the formal as well as informal types of self-organization and the self-support that refugees provide individually yet also collectively. This, however, does not mean that those who engage in self-organizations always act entirely collaboratively, selflessly, or in a supportive manner – in line with the varying forms of organizations, the underlying motives for initiating, entering into, and engaging with self-organizations may differ significantly too.

Informal Self-Organizations

Oftentimes, the most important support comes via the closest and informal types of self-organizations, including networks of family members, friends, neighbours, or those of the same religion. These networks are deeply embedded in refugees' everyday lives and part of their routines in exile.

In fact, the majority of refugees' self-organizations in Kampala and Kyaka II exist as such fairly loose set-ups and mainly seek to provide collective social support. They are primarily community-based and thus have a limited geographical range, occurring both in a temporary and ad hoc manner (especially in the wake of emergencies) as well as maintaining their initiatives in the long term. In line with the logic of collective support, informal self-organizations do not possess strategically defined leadership structures with strict hierarchies and determined roles (e.g., chairperson). However, this does not imply an absolute absence of hierarchies, nor is it evidence of a random assembly of individuals. Although representing dynamic social gatherings, such self-organizations are characterized by regular meetings with strategic objectives taking place as casual gatherings. They furthermore reflect measures of in- and exclusion, primarily informal in nature (hence without membership regulations).

Interlocutors explained in this context the multi-faceted support they both share and receive, ranging from immediate to long-term

needs.[13] At the everyday level, this includes shared routines and joint tasks that foster a sense of community and belonging and contribute to mental well-being. In times of urgent need, support extends to material assistance, such as sharing meals or shelter, alongside emotional help and peer counselling to cope with past traumas and present challenges. Other strategies are economically oriented and aim at securing medium- to long-term stability – for example, by sharing contacts or other information to enhance access to income opportunities.

However, because such social systems and their wide modes of support are so commonplace, their value frequently goes unnoticed, and they are seldom recognized as genuine self-organized collectives and practices. Yet, agency is exercised through social relations, which is why the closest relationships are essential and a fundamental form or self-organization. One might still wonder (and we have encountered these questions at conferences and workshops) whether informal and loosely assembled support systems, such as families and friendship circles, can constitute forms of self-organization, as these may be seen as ordinary social structures, widespread, or perhaps even accidentally arising. We believe it is crucial to place people's lived experiences at the core and use these as decisive elements. Conflict and displacement frequently sever family and friendship ties, and interlocutors in Kampala and Kyaka II shared their worries for those missing and sorrow over lost loved ones. Moreover, they explained in detail their effort to self-organize in order to maintain existing ties or forge new ones, establish support structures in families and among friends, and sustain or rebuild their sense of belonging to one another.[14] Social bonding through the same routinized activities and shared experiences can furthermore expand to a community circle and provide individuals with reciprocal support. The research in Uganda thus shows that these informal social systems represent the most fundamental types of self-organization among those in exile – as established and maintained for mutual support, protection, economic gain, or other

13 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kampala.

14 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 February 2017, Kampala; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

purposes. And yet, belonging to a certain collective and the necessity of adhering to the respective norms can represent enormous challenges and strains for people too.

In Kampala, the value of such self-organized social support systems was repeatedly emphasized and inherently connected to individuals' deliberate decisions to live close to other refugees in similar parts of the city. Many people we spoke with similarly emphasized – regardless of their origins and backgrounds – that they stayed in certain areas because of the accompanying web of social relations and thus the support they could develop and draw on. They also highlighted the sense of familiarity, which not only enabled them to ask for help in times of need but also facilitated collective economic practices.[15] Hence, by living in close proximity to each other and self-organizing, refugees' mutual support provides people with greater opportunities as well as help in emergencies, can ease everyday tasks, and also helps nurture feelings of belonging and comfort. However, these collectives can also become exhaustive and worrisome for individuals – for example, when they cannot contribute as they feel is expected of them, or when trusted social networks turn against them and misuse their commitment.[16]

This applies similarly to people in Kyaka II, though their lives are deeply affected by the surrounding political, legal, and humanitarian systems, including the decisions and constraints that government authorities and aid organizations impose on them. In spite of the restrictions, interlocutors also described ways in which they self-organize for mutual support, create spaces of trust for themselves and each other, and collectively manage everyday life. This includes common practices such as gathering firewood or water together, undertaken both for security reasons and for the companionship such activities offer.[17] Those in close proximity often become instrumental for self-organization, not only developing everyday mutual support, such as during harvesting, but also providing protection in times of violence.[18] As one Congolese woman recounted, "We go together to

15 E.g., man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.

16 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

17 Discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

18 Women from Burundi, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II.

the garden, we wash clothes together, we collect firewood together … The most important thing is to give each other counselling, to give each other ideas [on] how to live."[19]

While these kinds of social support systems are certainly universal among all human beings worldwide, the difficult conditions in exile both complicate them and heighten their relevance for the well-being of individuals. Farming – or digging, as many interlocutors referred to it – is a particular issue given Uganda's focus on self-reliance through agriculture in camps. Reflecting the sentiments of many in Kyaka II, one interlocutor highlighted the benefits of working together in self-organized agricultural collectives: "When you dig for one person, if the day fails you lose the day together. If it rains, it hits you together. It's because of the conditions. You share the same suffering, and you can endure."[20] While government authorities and aid organizations also attempt to promote, or even impose, collective farming, the genuine feelings of companionship, trust, and reliability can flourish only when people self-organize on their own terms.

Such agricultural collectives exemplify how the value of social connections and economic benefits intertwine within self-organization. Moreover, they are indicative of the spectrum of self-organizations: Agricultural collectives exist both as informal groups, where partly varying individuals support each other, and as highly formalized entities with clearly defined sets of rules and modes of co-operation among members. Over time, these collectives can also evolve from informal gatherings into formalized organizations. This dynamic also applies to other forms of self-organizations, such as self-help groups, cultural groups, economic trading networks, and political advocacy groups. Self-organized family and friendship circles or neighbourhood collectives can turn into formalized entities too – for example, leveraging the trust within groups to create formalized refugee-led organizations that extend support to other individuals as well. Such social embeddedness of self-organization is at the core of chapter 5.

Formalized Self-Organizations

In Kampala and Kyaka II, formalized self-organizations frequently arise from informal ones. Having grown over time, often over the

19 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kyaka II.
20 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.

course of several years, these established entities are characterized by formalized internal structures. Self-organizing thus translates into holding regular meetings, adhering to self-developed bylaws, and establishing membership regulations and hierarchical decision-making with positions such as chair, vice-chair, counsellor, secretary, and treasurer. In some of these organizations, members elect individuals to these positions, further institutionalizing their governance and operational frameworks.

Despite long-term developments, interlocutors reflect how formalized self-organizations are strategically founded by refugees primarily to pursue a common aim – for example, generating income or preserving cultural or religious knowledges from their country of origin.[21] This indicates how individuals' practising agency and self-organizing can cultivate pioneering efforts and thus drive and manifest the creation of novel contexts for action, following Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 1009). As such, a diverse range of such entities exist, including cultural, dance, and singing collectives, savings groups, educational and training collectives, and social-support endeavours. While it is possible to differentiate here between thematic foci and fields of engagement, meaning economic or social purposes, such self-organizing efforts often revolve around several connected areas – as, for instance, when a religious collective maintains a savings scheme or when economically oriented collectives also engage in cultural endeavours. In addition to their core objectives, many of the formalized self-organizations therefore provide social support for other refugees more generally. This occurs either indirectly as a side effect of these organizations' choice to gather in particular places and to constitute social networks, or as a distinct objective in terms of counselling and self-help activities. In line with that, one woman from DR Congo highlighted the key relevance of social support: "Being with others helps. It is only when you are alone that you get those bad thoughts."[22]

Strategically seeking to offer social support was shared widely by interlocutors who lead formalized self-organizations, and several put

21 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with five men, 7 July 2017, Kyaka II.

22 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

particular emphasis on their members' mental well-being.[23] Their own self-organized support stands in contrast to the limited access to and brief duration of the psychosocial counselling the aid apparatus offers (Krause 2021, 101, 12–16). Psychological or psychosocial self-help groups for survivors of gender-based violence, for example, focus on medium-term mutual support and peer counselling, as practices that do not rely on top-down decision making about access but instead draw on mutual experiences and the sharing of stories to the benefit of all involved.[24] Yet, people were often confronted with various economic, political, and legal issues, and many self-organizations thus decided to also engage in wider assistance therewith.[25] We address their meanings along with their social embeddedness in detail in chapter 5.

Helping those in emergencies and acute situations of danger was also important to other formalized self-organizations, thereby collectively working to provide comfort as well as a safety net in times of hardship. The so-called burial groups constitute one prominent example. Members collectively save money but also give support to ensure all involved can handle unforeseen circumstances, such as the death of a loved one or ill health. One member in Kyaka II described the reason to come together in such groups as follows: "When we realized we are here and we do not have much help, when one loses a friend or member, it is difficult to get a coffin. So we decided to come together and contribute 5,000 [Ugandan] shillings so that, in the event of death, it would be of help. This was successful."[26]

Once established, self-organizations' goals as well as their reach are not set in stone but can also adapt, expand, or change. Some of these burial groups, for example, broadened their approach and scope over time to go beyond emergency situations. A member of another such self-organizations in Kampala recounted the following:

23 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.

24 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.

25 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; discussion with ten women from DR Congo and Rwanda, 16 November 2017, Kyaka II.

26 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.

> Congolese Refugee Community in Uganda (CRCU) was founded in 2007 when people used to go for burial. As they went for burial, they realized that they were actually big in numbers; so we decided that it would be great if we keep meeting … [and the] Congolese refugee community was started. We have meetings to plan weddings, funerals, and even celebrate big days together … During meetings we contribute 20,000 Ugandan shillings voluntarily in the Congolese community and the money is used for social assistance.[27]

In addition, interlocutors highlighted the importance of economic initiatives – as often connected to social support. This orientation is crucial due to the various issues that individuals face concerning insufficient livelihoods and unsustainable means of income generation and employment. As a result, self-organization and self-support often intersect with economic considerations and related benefits for individuals and/or the community at large. The economic and social *entrepreneurship* shown by refugees' self-organization has also been discussed in the literature, illustrating how those concerned generate profits and contribute to "opportunities for others" (Betts, Omata, et al. 2017, 717).

Besides vocational and skills training, economic trading networks, and economic co-operatives,[28] one form of self-organization we found time and again in Kyaka II and Kampala was savings groups. These collectives offer mutual support in everyday life as well as emergency situations – for example, by helping a person by providing "money for house rent, [or] for school fees of my children," as one woman in Kampala explained.[29] Interlocutors primarily spoke about a system of rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), which is neither new nor limited to refugees in Uganda alone. At its heart, the ROSCA system is based on a cycle that has a clear beginning and end. Members of a particular collective deposit a fixed amount and receive the sum of a single deposit when their predetermined withdrawal slot comes around; regulations and arrangements vary across groups, however.

27 Anonymized to safeguard the interlocutor's privacy.

28 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.

29 Woman from Rwanda, discussion with three women and two men, 23 June 2017, Kampala.

This helps individuals to accumulate the capital central to starting businesses and enabling group members to remain in control. We will explore the economic value that interlocutors ascribe to such self-organizations, but also the limitations they face, in chapter 6.

Some formalized self-organizations furthermore focus on representation. In Kampala and Kyaka II, such forms can be found in structures based on elders as well as on religious, women's, youth, or community leaders and other collectives that have emerged over time. The leaders and members of such collectives are rarely elected but are nonetheless highly important for the communities. Some of these social structures already existed in refugees' countries of origin prior to their flight to Uganda, and they are therefore rebuilt and maintained as a form of social order. Such self-organized collectives enjoy much respect and trust in their respective communities, being involved in settling disputes, helping find solutions, providing advice to individuals in case of problems, sharing information about the local situation, as well as discussing any new developments (e.g., Ntegyerize and Onyoin 2016; Krause 2021, 102, 68). They partly also help tackle issues arising with the agencies.

As a result of the wide-ranging support structures that refugees self-organize and provide for other refugees, formalized self-organizations ultimately become actors in Uganda's refugee regime. Their relevance became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic; due to the wide local network as well as the trust they received from other refugees, they mobilized much-needed support as government and humanitarian organizations scaled down their projects.[30] This was not limited to Uganda but was reported worldwide (e.g., Alio et al. 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Refiloe Ogude and Chekero 2020; Boru 2020; McSweeney et al. 2020; Betts et al. 2021; Segadlo et al. 2021a, 2021b; Chandiga Justine 2021; Routte et al. 2022). However, these organizations have continued to function far beyond the pandemic in Uganda, and some also seek to collaborate with OPM, UNHCR, and other humanitarian and development organizations in working to provide assistance to refugees; significant issues often prevail, though. How such formalized, refugee-led organizations mobilize support with and for community members, build networks among other such organizations, and deal with the restrictions imposed on them is at the core of chapter 4.

30 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 25 January 2021.

Finally, some but by no means all of the established self-organizations are registered as NGOs or community-based organizations (CBOs) in Uganda.[31] In fact, during our research, we only encountered a few choosing to pursue registration. While this is crucial, for example, to acquire external funding, the bureaucratic obstacles accompanying this process is described as being very difficult.

Individuals must collect the necessary information about national procedures to register and then navigate the various obstacles along the way. While other refugee-led organizations and the Refugee Led Organisation Network Uganda (RELON Uganda) might be helpful here, interlocutors raised three key problems: First, refugees are generally not allowed to engage in political activity in Uganda, and authorities assessing the registration forms of refugee-led organizations might judge their aims and actions to be political so as to curtail them – even when this is not actually the case. One interlocutor recalled how authorities claimed that "some of the members were engaged in oppositional activity," and therefore rejected their registration.[32] Second, if based in sites like Kyaka II, leaders and representatives of self-organizations require the approval of camp authorities to be able to register. This leaves them dependent on the judgment of those in power. One interlocutor offered the following criticism: "It is always hard when a refugee comes up with a registered group or an organization because there are many restrictions."[33] Third and finally, some representatives relayed how they had to deal with corruption on the part of decision makers. One hence stressed that, "[f]or you to be granted the documents, you have to have money. Otherwise no one knows your organization in the system."[34] Hence, due to the highly

31 For further legal information on the Non-Governmental Organisations Act 2016, see Uganda Legal Information Institute, "Uganda Non-Governmental Organisations Act, Chapter 109," 31 December 2023, https://ulii.org/akn/ug/act/2016/5/eng@2023-12-31. On the Non-Governmental Organisations Regulations 2017, see Ministry of Internal Affairs, Republic of Uganda, "The Non-Governmental Organisations Regulations, 2017," https://mia.go.ug/resources/regulations/non-governmental-organisations-rregulations-2017 (last accessed 25 August 2025). For the Non-Governmental Organisations Registration (Amendment) Act 2006, see https://www.mtic.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/NGO-Registration-Amendment-Act-2003.pdf.

32 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.

33 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.

34 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.

difficult process, we do not use registration as a benchmark to identify formalized refugee-led organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Refugees – like all human beings – are individuals who position themselves in social systems and networks. Their self-organization thus represents a strategy for interaction, for collective action, and for coping as well as a key resource for individuals to draw on. Building on the relational approach to agency from a gender-sensitive perspective, complemented by situated knowledge, allows us to pay attention to individuals' endeavours as part of and for their self-organized collectives. It facilitates our exploration of how refugees' self-organizations are inherently connected to individual agency, and both temporally and socially embedded. By self-organizing and through their self-organized collectives – and thus self-organization as both a practice and an institution – individuals navigate their gender-specific past experiences, contemporary encounters, and future orientations. This embeddedness is central to contextualizing refugees' actions and considering how they relate to the web of social relations that they create and are a part of. Moreover, exercising agency by self-organizing is not always driven by intention but also by routines and/or a pragmatic need based on everyday experience, future aspirations, as well as the current conditions, and thus can present itself in various forms.

The theoretical framework places a broad spectrum of informal to formalized self-organizations at the core of our research. These collectives represent refugees' own collective responses to acute problems but also everyday endeavours shaping their lives in exile – by mobilizing im/material resources collectively. Although it is oftentimes the challenging conditions that individuals encounter in Kampala and Kyaka II that trigger their self-organization, the value of such efforts should not be reduced to that. This is demonstrated also by the variety of different types of self-organization, which we have introduced in this chapter. Interlocutors ascribe diverse meanings to them, ultimately revealing that these self-organized collectives are part of their lives – but they can also become overwhelming for individuals and prompt issues.

The detailed exploration of how this unfolds in Kampala and Kyaka II is the focus of the following chapters. As indicated in the previous pages, we examine the humanitarian roles, social embeddedness, and economic significance of self-organizations in depth. Chapter 3 delves into Uganda's refugee regime, including its humanitarian system

and (mis)use and manipulation of refugee groups and committees for aid purposes. Chapter 4 then illuminates how formalized refugee-led organizations indeed function as humanitarian actors through the wide-ranging protection and assistance they mobilize and provide, though they are rarely recognized as such. Following this, we focus on the social embeddedness of these entities in chapter 5, paying particular attention to the more informal self-organizations. Lastly, we explore the economic implications of collective initiatives in chapter 6.

3

"Life Is Hard"

Uganda's Refugee Regime, (Mis)Use of Refugee Groups, and Prevalent Challenges

"Uganda has the most progressive refugee policies in Africa, if not the world." With this statement, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi praised the approach taken in Uganda to protecting and assisting refugees (Clayton 2018). This acclaim is no isolated occurrence; Uganda is often lauded for its apparently progressive approach to refugee protection and assistance in politics, media, and academia (e.g., Akello 2009; Krause 2013b, 147; Byaruhanga 2016; Betts, Bloom, et al. 2017, 10; Betts 2021; Ahimbisibwe 2019, 68). Such praise is rooted not only in Uganda's legal framework with the new Refugees Act of 2006, which came into force in 2009 and reveals improvements to the prior refugee law in the country, and the accompanying Refugee Regulations of 2010. Above all it is rooted in its broader political approach to refugee protection and assistance with development-oriented strategies to promote refugees' self-reliance and recently resilience, which is central to Uganda's refugee regime.

The praise is certainly relevant given Uganda's history of hosting of many refugees, especially from neighbouring countries. Sheltering almost 1.8 million refugees in 2024, Uganda is among the nations with the highest refugee populations globally (UNHCR 2024c). The majority of refugees have fled recurring and long-lasting violent conflicts, civil strife, ethnic tensions, and political instability in surrounding countries, notably DR Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea. In the Kivu regions of DR Congo, for example, violent conflicts fuelled by armed groups, competition for resources, and inter-ethnic rivalries have been ongoing since the 1960s and have led to extensive violence, specifically sexual violence, and massive displacements (see Autesserre 2008; Eriksson

Baaz and Stern 2009; Karbo and Mutisi 2012). The violence in South Sudan, exacerbated by political power struggles after the independence referendum in 2011, has also driven millions to seek safety in neighbouring countries, including Uganda (see Nyadera 2018; Ellsberg et al. 2020). Due to the extensive and prolonged violence, many refugees are compelled to remain in Uganda for years or even decades because of the lack of durable solutions other than repatriation.

Against this backdrop of protracted situations, the focus on development-oriented assistance and self-reliance appears necessary. Self-reliance has a long history and centrally revolves around economic considerations – and, more concretely, around agriculture in the so-called settlements, which essentially embody a form of encampment.[1] Echoing the notion of *helping them to help themselves*, refugees receive initial assistance and land for farming through which they are supposed to meet their subsistence needs, become self-reliant, and live relatively independent from aid services in camps. This logic has been prominent for decades now. As early as 1962, the year Uganda gained independence, it is noted that "[e]very effort is being made to assist the refugees in becoming self-supporting" by not just providing relief but also making "land, tools and seeds available to the refugees" (UNHCR 1962b, para. 111).

Refugee groups and refugee committees, as they are referred to, are assigned a key role here. Under the umbrella of participatory approaches, government authorities and aid organizations have repeatedly emphasized the significance of refugees forming groups and collectively pursuing self-reliance (e.g., UNHCR 1971, para. 138; UNHCR and OPM 2004, 18; Government of Uganda et al. 2017, 31, 2). At first sight, this might seem to indicate that refugees are not only allowed but supported to self-organize. Yet, as we will show in this chapter, similar to the self-reliance approach, this group formation essentially serves humanitarian purposes, deeply anchored in the belief that the collective drive enhances the prospects for refugees to achieve economic self-reliance and secure adequate livelihoods. To this end, political and humanitarian decision makers impose critical multiplier functions to groups to amplify the resources they can access or

1 In chapter 1, we address the critical framing of settlement risking to de-problematize encampment, which is why we generally use the term *camp* in this book.

mobilize. While farming remains a key focus, the group idea is also extended to other areas within the refugee regime. In Kyaka II, for instance, additional livelihood support was provided only to groups, as they were considered more sustainable due to social control among members. Financial support was tied to certain criteria, such as having a formalized structure, which led to groups having to adapt to these requirements. These problems reveal how authorities orchestrate supposedly participatory involvement and how top-down criteria regarding group structure and forms of participation lead to changes in previously effective configurations.

How do refugees experience the aid system, the self-reliance focus, and everyday life in Uganda? Throughout the research with refugees in the camp Kyaka II and the city Kampala, interlocutors frequently highlighted the array of difficulties they have faced over the course of many years. A key issue is the imbalance of formalized and regular aid provided only in camps but hardly in cities. A woman from Somalia succinctly captured these complex challenges in Kampala by stressing that "life is hard." She encountered problems since arriving in the city, with no assistance available at all; a single mother of four, she faced a lack of money for "school fees, thus my children dropped out of school," experienced health problems, and had to deal with economic hardship given high rent prices and insufficient income.[2] Issues also prevail in Kyaka II. One woman from DR Congo similarly remarked, "[l]ife is so hard."[3] She explained how camp life is shaped by control and limitations, wide-ranging insecurities, poor to no education facilities for her children, insufficient food, and digging as the only option. This echoes sentiments commonly expressed by interlocutors in Kyaka II and Kampala, showing that being a refugee there does not mean having a secure life. Instead, people are exposed to many acute challenges – despite the widely praised progressiveness of Uganda's refugee regime.

The challenges surrounding Uganda's refugee regime and aid system – including the long-term use of camps, the focus on self-reliance, the ascribed roles of groups, and refugees' experiences thereof – are key in this chapter. We therefore analyze the humanitarian, political, and legal framework established for the treatment of refugees in Uganda,

2 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
3 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 July 2017, Kyaka II.

which fundamentally impacts refugees' agency. Following Emirbayer and Mishe's (1998) theoretical approach to agency, we understand structures to be both the basis and the result of social action. By their actions, actors continually (re)produce structures; the latter thus consist of repeated modes of action and order social interaction. The humanitarian, political, and legal setting that refugees encounter in countries of asylum like Uganda is a particular one, as the primary actors developing these structures are government and aid organizations. Refugees seem to mainly face the effects of these structures despite the focus on self-reliance. While this chapter dives into these aid frameworks, as producing the structures, the following chapters turn in due course to refugees' practices and especially to their self-organization, through which they create their own support systems and social structures, and also challenge, exceed, subvert, cope with, or otherwise manoeuvre the structures imposed on them.

We structure the chapter in three sections. We start with a historical perspective to reflect that the self-reliance approach is not new but has been used since colonial times and has thus prevailed for decades in Uganda's refugee regime. Then as today, the encampment policy limits aid services to camps. The contemporary aid system is key in the second section. Despite the camp focus, we also elaborate on the minimal, selective support that some aid organizations provide voluntarily in Kampala and how refugees experience this support and life there. Then we delve into the aid landscape, the top-down apparatus, and the promotion of self-reliance in Kyaka II along with refugees' perceptions thereof. The third section focuses on the (mis)use of refugee groups in the humanitarian system of Kyaka II, offering novel insights into how external actors orchestrated refugees' involvement. We show that government authorities and aid organizations encourage the founding of groups, or partly even install groups, and influence their work. Hence, these groups are ultimately humanitarian tools, but refugees challenge the control and restrictions.

These humanitarian structures shape what it means for a person to be a refugee, a reality best understood and described by someone who has to live it. This chapter begins with the poem *Just Because I'm a Refugee*, composed by Bengekya Mugay Gédéon, a public health specialist and poet in Uganda. We are profoundly grateful that he shared his poem with us and allowed us to include it in the book. In his poem, he captures so succinctly the complex challenges and the intense effects arising from being a refugee.

JUST BECAUSE I'M A REFUGEE

Bengekya Mugay Gédéon

I'm that child, that youth, that old person, that lady, that boy!
That woman, that man, that person far from his joy.
I'm that Congolese, that Burundian, that Somali and
That Eritrean, Ethiopian, ... That fled his own motherland.

I'm that adult who has never seen a ballot box
That foreign whose mouth is full of nostalgic talks,
Whose real identity is unknown by his society
I am that person labelled and nicknamed "refugee"

I'm that design of a human pushed by a violent storm
A violent tempest of machetes, guns, war, bombs of his home,
To be found covered by two hands on the logo of UNHCR
Enclosed like an egg in its shell. When will I ever see far?

I had lost all my properties and I had gone back to zero,
I'd lost my life of a student in Burundi, Rwanda, Congo,
I feast every 20th June of a year my anniversary,
Not in rejoicing but in crying, because I'm a refugee.

All my heart is broken and full of nostalgias,
In my head remembrances of my home jazz
I always think about my friends, my sister and brother,
I always miss the love and strokes of a mother and father

I live in someone's home when my own lives in my dreams,
I don't taste the honey of my home, its milk and creams
I do not see the beautifulness of my home physically,
Only in books, TV, internet, dreams, ... Because I'm a refugee.

Others spend nights sleeping so they can dream about tomorrow,
When I spend days walking under sunshine, on fatigue and sorrow,
Then when I get tired I drink no cup of water but a cup of hope,
Without knowing the time when this hardship will hug a full stop.

This status made my vision fall into a deep omission,
I'm living like someone blind on the way leading to my passion
Humiliations are my daily bread, I lost my dignity,
Discriminated, I am, just because I'm a refugee.

I always pray that the Lord let peace in my home fall like rain,
So I can go to enjoy it and give up this name of "foreign"
I pray for a coming, an abidance, an eternity,
Of an unshakable kingdom of peace and security.

I pray for a closure of those slaughterhouses in Somalia,
For a right usage of guns in Beni, Butembo, Ethiopia
I pray for an end of refugee camps in the world really,
I pray for peace just because I don't want to be a refugee.

Generously contributed on 9 November 2022

LONG-LASTING FOCUS ON REFUGEE AID AND SELF-RELIANCE IN UGANDA: SOME HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

The focus within refugee aid on self-reliance is not new but dates back to colonial times. The British colonial regime decided to support European refugees displaced due to the Second World War by settling them in colonized southern and eastern Africa between 1941 and 1952, including in Uganda.[4] Most were Polish refugees who were placed in two camps in Masindi and Mukono Districts. Moreover, Italian prisoners of war and civil internees were taken to a camp in Jinja and to Entebbe, while stateless Jews and civilian internees from Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia were settled in a camp close to Soroti (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1993, 1; see also Lingelbach 2020; Tshimba 2022; Warlik 2019).

4 In addition to Uganda, European refugees were also settled in Kenya, Tanzania (then Tanganyika), Malawi (then Nyasaland), Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia), Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), and South Africa (then Union of South Africa) (see Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1993; Lingelbach 2020).

Lwanga-Lunyiigo stresses that the British colonial authorities sought "to make the camps self-sufficient" and "encouraged [the refugees] to cultivate their own food" (1993, 7), inherently contradicting the current political labelling of this approach as progressive. These camps were set up in remote regions to control people's movements in and out of the sites and their interactions with Ugandans. To pursue self-reliance, the camp inhabitants had to engage in agriculture, breeding of pigs and chickens, and other crafts such as "weaving, spinning, tailoring, cobbling and basket making" (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1993, 7–8). They further self-organized children's schooling and cultural, religious, and work-related endeavours, which was deemed acceptable "as long as their activities were not in conflict with the policy of the British authorities" (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1993, 8). This is important as, despite refugees seemingly leading independent lives and self-governing the camps, the colonial authorities maintained control. Correspondingly, some scholars reflect that Polish refugees experienced their time in the camps as "inmates" (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1993, 8), "internees" (Murkociński 2018, 131), or "prisoners" (Lingelbach 2020, 227) due to the containment conditions on-site. This resonates with contemporary research about refugees' warehousing in camps (e.g., Agier 2011; Jaji 2012; McConnachie 2016; Krause 2018, 2021); and some interlocutors we spoke with also described Kyaka II as a prison.[5]

This aid system along with the self-reliance focus was not applied to all refugees in Uganda at that time, however. Instead, the colonial authorities granted support only to white European people and withheld it from those fleeing colonial violences in or to Uganda. The racialized conditions are evident in the example of refugees escaping violences in Rwanda from 1952 onward. The colonial authorities initially permitted some limited assistance but altered the approach when the numbers of refugees increased. Then the authorities illegalized their entry into Uganda and subsequently rejected and forcefully repatriated them. Ugandan members of the Legislative Council opposed and tried to install an open-door policy, but the motion was not successful. Change occurred after Uganda's independence in 1962; people fleeing from Rwanda – and soon also other states – would be assisted right away (Otunnu 1994, 1999; 2016, 211–24; Mulumba 2010, 65–99; Ahimbisibwe 2019).

5 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.

Before Uganda's independence, the first legal framework on refugees was developed: the Control of Alien Refugees Act, Cap. 64, adopted in 1960 (Government of Uganda 1960). It is considered "a remnant of British colonial times when there was a need to control German internees during the Second World War" (Janmyr 2014, 114; see also Payne 1998, 125–6). This 1960 Act was criticized for its complex restrictions, especially concerning the freedom of movement. In 2006, the government introduced a new Refugees Act that would enter into force three years later (Government of Uganda 2006). Compared to its predecessor, the 2006 Act includes a range of revisions. Most notably, article 30 now grants recognized refugees freedom of movement within the country. Moreover, article 29 gives refugees the rights to own property, work in agriculture, commerce, handicrafts, and industry, to practise a profession according to their qualifications, to establish companies (following domestic law), and to access employment. Despite these changes, certain issues remain. One is the extent of the granted right to freedom of movement under article 30. It is in fact limited, as article 44 asserts that the minister may "designate places or areas on public land to be transit centres or refugee settlements for the purposes of (a) temporarily accommodating persons who have applied for grant of refugee states … ; and (b) local settlement and integration of refugees whose applications for refugee status have been granted" (Government of Uganda 2006, art. 44). The article proceeds to note that refugees have to apply for permission to reside elsewhere in the country, and hence their freedom of movement is indeed restricted.

Returning to the earlier history, after becoming independent, Uganda's focus was on providing relief measures and specifically on supporting "refugees in becoming self-supporting," mainly through agriculture (UNHCR 1962b, para. 111). While UNHCR offers a reasoning that revolves around people's well-being, noting how dependence on "more or less precarious outside assistance … in the long run would be degrading," and they should instead become "masters of their own fate" (UNHCR 1962a, appendix I, para. 5), it is crucial to consider the local conditions. Uganda's approach was driven not just by an open-door policy and post-colonial solidarity but also by pragmatic reasons: At the time of independence and state building, Uganda was confronted with wide-ranging economic, political, and social challenges. The government was barely able to provide large-scale aid to refugees, who thus had to find ways to be self-reliant (concerning the political developments, see Otunnu 2016, 211–24).

The self-reliance focus has been accompanied by encampment policies. Plans for "local settlement in agriculture" began as early as 1962 (UNHCR 1963, para. 66, see also 105) and were solidified in "rural settlements" by 1967 (UNHCR 1968, para. 147) and "organized settlements" by 1970 (UNHCR 1971, para. 133) – ultimately representing encampment. By 1967, the number of Rwandese, Sudanese, and Congolese refugees had increased to 163,000, with most being accommodated in twelve such camps. Of these – Oruchinga, Nakivale, Rwamwanja, Kyangwali, Kyaka, Kahunge, Kinyara, Ibuga, Agago, Acolpi, Nakapiripirit, and Onigo (UNHCR 1968, para. 147, 54, 59) – the first four are still in operation as of 2024 (UNHCR 2024c); Kyaka would be replaced by its successor, Kyaka II, in the mid-1980s.

The 1990s mark the start of a more strategic period in Uganda's refugee response, with the development of a number of policies for refugee aid and especially for promoting refugees' self-reliance. These include, most notably, the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) covering the period from 1999 to 2004 (UNHCR and OPM 2004), and the subsequent Development Assistance for Refugee Hosting Areas for Uganda Self Reliance Strategy (DAR) starting in 2003 (UNHCR 2003a). In 2016, OPM introduced the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA) (OPM 2016); and in the following year, the government adopted the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment, Strategic Framework (REHOPE) (Government of Uganda et al. 2017). This is closely intertwined with Uganda's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) (Government of Uganda 2018, 2021), which seeks to implement the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. The core elements remain unchanged, with refugees supposed to live in camps and receiving land for agriculture, seemingly engendering self-reliance. As the reference to the Global Compact indicates, Uganda's response does not stand alone; rather, it is entangled in broader initiatives for development-oriented refugee aid. These include the Integrated Zonal Development Approach in the 1960s, Refugee Aid and Development in the 1980s, Returnee Aid and Development in the 1990s, the Transition Solution Initiative in the 2010s, and the Global Compact on Refugees of 2018 (for an overview, see Krause 2017a; see also Betts 1969, 1984; Gorman 1986; Meyer 2006; Krause 2013b; Betts, Bloom, et al. 2017).

Across this long time and the policies, so-called refugee groups have been key especially to enhancing the likelihood of refugees attaining self-reliance. For example, as early as 1970, UNHCR reported that "a

farming co-operative was established for the cultivation of cotton" (UNHCR 1971, para. 138), while the following year saw an increase of "[f]ood and crop production," with the agency stressing that "co-operative activities have become more extensive" (UNHCR 1973, para. 99). This prevailed over time, and the SRS from the late 1990s highlights that, "[t]hrough giving communities the opportunity to come together and form groups and committees for a wide variety of activities, there has been increased opportunity for people to participate in their community affairs (although care should be taken not to overload a community with committees)." The strategy even states that "every project intervention seems to necessitate the creation of a group or committee of some kind" (UNHCR and OPM 2004, 18). While recognizing some limitations, the SRS also stresses the relevance of "informal group formation for mutual support and income generating activities especially for women" (UNHCR and OPM 2004, vi). The contemporary REHOPE strategy further strengthens the economic focus underlining the roles of "savings and loan associations" and "group-based production schemes" (Government of Uganda et al. 2017, 31, 2).

These developments illustrate the relevance ascribed to refugees' collective efforts. The prevailing economic focus on self-reliance indicates that government authorities and aid organizations assigned the responsibility to become self-reliant not only to individuals but also to the group as a whole. These are strategically believed to enhance the likelihood for refugees to secure sufficient livelihoods. Yet, we will show below that the use – or rather instrumentalization – of refugee groups extends beyond such collective self-support as groups are also used for humanitarian purposes.

AID STRUCTURES IN THE CAMP – AND HARDLY IN THE CITY

During the research in Kyaka II and Kampala, we saw how these developments prevailed. A prominent issue that is immediately evident when examining refugee aid in Uganda is the focus on the so-called settlements. In fact, the whole refugee aid system in the country continues to revolve around these designated sites where refugees have to live as per Uganda's legal framework (Government of Uganda 2006, art. 44; 2010, art. 47). This arrangement essentially reflects an encampment policy, which restricts aid delivery to these sites. In contrast, refugees living in urban areas do not have access to a

comparable scope of services. This requires us to analyze particularly the aid structures in Kyaka to discern how these affect refugees and their agency. Yet, we cannot and do not want to place a sole focus on camps and thereby neglect the even minimal support provided for individuals in Kampala that some aid organizations provide voluntarily. Therefore, we first explore the selective aid measures in Kampala before delving into the aid landscape and apparatus in Kyaka II along with how refugees experience these.

Limited Aid in Kampala

Given that up to 95,000 refugees resided in Kampala at the time of research, and considering that the number increased significantly in the following years, to more than 156,000 (UNHCR 2016, 2017b, 2024c), the humanitarian focus on camps is highly problematic and causes challenges. This focus leaves those living in urban areas like Kampala without access to systematic, formalized, and regular aid services such as shelter, food and water, health care, education, or legal assistance. One might argue that such assistance and services are not deemed necessary for displace people who move to and reside in urban areas, since they are obliged to submit an application for residence outside of camps to government authorities – and as part of this they must prove they have the means to afford and sustain life in the city. Hence, they have to prove their self-reliance. However, the application process is complex, difficult, and oftentimes expensive, which is why many see no other way but to move to cities, whether temporarily or long-term, without such official permission. This is evident not least in the high number of refugees living in urban areas, and many of those we were able to speak with did not undergo such an application process.[6] Moreover, many found themselves in highly precarious legal, economic, political, and social conditions. The lack of recognition and support as well as the challenging circumstances for displaced individuals exacerbate their vulnerabilities in cities, frequently pushing them into informal economies and insecure living conditions. We will address the extent of these problems in chapters 4–6.

6 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 June 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

MINIMAL VOLUNTARY SUPPORT BY SOME NGOS

This disparity in service provision between camps and urban areas underscores the urgent need for a more inclusive humanitarian approach that acknowledges and addresses the needs of all people with lived experiences of displacement in Uganda, regardless of their location. Some aid organizations seem to be pursuing such an inclusive approach voluntarily as they are implementing certain aid measures for displaced individuals in Kampala. These include NGOs such as InterAid, Finnish Refugee Council (FRC), and Jesuit Refugee Service. However, their support is not continuously offered to all refugees living in the city; rather, it is given selectively, focusing on specific services for limited periods of time – and numbers of people.

Arriving in Kampala is therefore not accompanied by a formalized support system in which refugees are registered and receive initial shelter and support – this only occurs in camps. Instead, the primary source of support for newly arriving individuals comes from social networks that refugees, and particularly their self-organizations, develop, mobilize, and offer. Formalized aid is also not offered in Kampala over the long term. The support that NGOs such as those mentioned offer is kept to a minimum and mainly revolves around essential needs – for instance, providing occasional one-time financial assistance for rent, school fees, medical support, or burial processes in times of need,[7] as well as counselling after traumatic events.[8] To some extent, the organizations also offer language classes or vocational trainings, such as tailoring services,[9] to help individuals better deal with life in the city and improve their livelihood prospects.

Aid workers from the NGOs with whom we had the opportunity to speak were well aware that such assistance is not sufficient to cater to people's needs. This is especially the case in emergency situations, where such occasional support falls short and significant gaps remain. Among many refugees and several aid workers addressing this issue time and again,[10] one aid worker explained, "[w]e provide some

7 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 31 January 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 3 February 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 February 2017, Kampala.
8 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 February 2017, Kampala.
9 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 February 2017, Kampala.
10 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 March 2017, Kampala; aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 4 April 2017, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala.

material assistance but the need is overwhelming; we don't know who to help and who not to. But we have worked out a system. We help the most recently arrived refugees, the pregnant women, the elderly, and the mentally handicapped."[11] Other organizations take similar approaches, and one aid worker noted that they "offer some services to those refugees that are extremely vulnerable."[12] This approach to aid delivery based on ascriptions of vulnerability resonates with structures in camps such as Kyaka II (see below).

Whenever possible, aid organizations try to enhance their offers by matching the resources and services made available, and interlocutors explained how they partly refer individuals in need of support to other organizations in case they offered appropriate services.[13] However, Uganda's encampment policy places severe structural, organizational, and financial constraints on these organizations and their collaboration as they receive minimal to no support from government authorities for their work with refugees in cities like Kampala. Also, international organizations such as UNHCR, which are instrumental in delivering refugee aid in camps, are hardly able to support, or collaborate with, aid organizations to extend services. This causes the very limited number of entities that frequently rely on international funding to offer services on a voluntary basis in urban areas. The aid infrastructure in Kampala thus starkly differs from the comprehensive system established in camps, where government authorities, international agencies, and NGOs work closely together.

The highly limited aid landscape in urban areas occurs not only in Uganda but in many countries worldwide. Although UNHCR (1997, 2009, 2011, 2014c) has been advocating for policy changes in order to enhance assistance and protection in urban areas for several years now (Crisp 2017; Crawford 2022), governments all over the world – which essentially decide about the scope and means of refugee protection and assistance within their territories – remain reluctant (Kibreab 2007; Koizumi and Hoffstaedter 2015). This is primarily rooted in a political interest in controlling refugees, which can be enacted in camps. Moreover, Fábos and Kibreab argue that "[s]patial segregation of refugees is seen as an important instrument of preventing refugees' integration into host societies by prolonging their refugee

11 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 11 April 2017, Kampala.
12 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 March 2017, Kampala.
13 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 11 April 2017, Kampala; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 March 2017, Kampala.

status" (2007, 3). Hence, practical shifts in policies, and also in funding allocations, lag behind, leaving significant gaps in refugees' support and intensifying the hardships they encounter. As a result, urban refugees often rely on their self-organized networks for assistance, which, while vital, cannot fully compensate for the lack of structured support and legal protection.

As a result of the aid constraints in Kampala, and influenced by Uganda's overall aid system, aid organizations also place the promotion of self-reliance at the core of their support measures in Kampala. Besides the above occasional emergency support, they seek primarily to implement projects that they think will equip people with the necessary skills and knowledge to become economically independent. Vocational training and language classes are central here. One aid worker underscored the aim to "build their livelihood ability so that they can afford the key aspects of life, have food security,"[14] while another explained the rationale behind training offers in the following terms:

> We focus on encouraging them to be self-reliant. We want them to improve their self-confidence and esteem. That is why our training is functional and participatory in nature. When we start the classes, we encourage them to participate as we build the curriculum. For example, during the class, the client can say, "My problem is that I can't go be able to buy something in the market," [and so] we teach them how they can buy from the market. We are practical educators.[15]

As part of such self-reliance measures, aid workers of different NGOs furthermore described how they provided specific trainings for members of refugee-led organizations. These cover a range of areas, and one aid worker outlined their focus on how to write proposals to apply for funding, to manage projects and funds, and to build businesses. He captured these trainings under the umbrella of "organizational capacity training for the refugee-led organizations," and argued, "[t]he reason we offer this training is because most of the refugee-led organizations could not attract funding because they had a lot [of] conflict between themselves, [and] no accountability for the resources. They were not documenting. We train them so that they

14 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 March 2017, Kampala.
15 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 4 April 2017, Kampala.

can become professional managers."[16] The extent to which this has borne fruit cannot be assessed based on the data available to us. However, our research suggests limitations; none of the leaders of formalized self-organizations that we were able to speak with in Kampala said they had participated in such trainings. Instead, they offered their own wide range of trainings to their members (see chapter 4 and 6).

The imbalance in services between camps and urban areas ultimately means that displaced individuals in Kampala, as in Uganda's other cities, are effectively on their own and must meet their own needs – while at the same time relying on the decisions government agencies take and the limitations refugee status produces. To this end, they frequently establish and rely on their own support systems and self-organized groups to meet their basic needs. This underscores the critical role of their own initiatives, central in the chapters ahead, in the absence of a broader institutional support infrastructure.

Refugees' Experiences of Scarce Support and Hardships in Kampala

Whereas refugees generally perceived the limited support of one-time financial assistance, counselling, language classes, and vocational training as helpful in coping with immediate issues, all interlocutors in Kampala also reflected on a host of enduring challenges. These mostly revolved around the structural limitations in Kampala, where the little support granted was just not sufficient to get by. Interlocutors were well aware of the discrepancy between the levels of aid provision in the country's camps and cities, and of the fact that aid organizations provided support voluntarily in Kampala. One man reflected that "oftentimes it's not enough to cater for everyone. Here in Kampala, organizations … are overwhelmed. The refugees are simply too many. Some are helped while others are not."[17]

Commonplace in people's narratives was strong criticism of the meagre support. One woman who had received counselling noted how "that is not enough. When you get back home you think about those same challenges, and even the counselling you received becomes useless."[18] Another explained that

16 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 4 April 2017, Kampala.
17 Man from Somalia, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kampala.
18 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 February 2017, Kampala.

> I used to go to [an aid organization], but I don't anymore. Going there with two twin children is very difficult. I used to go there just to process documentation and receive some advice. When we are sick, we go to there, but they also give you enough money to buy Panadol or send you to the … clinic. Or if you are very sick and honestly need their help, you keep going and they will tell you to come back the next day. When you come back the next day, you will be told to come back the next day until you cannot go anymore.[19]

Refugees also lamented the way they were treated by humanitarian staff. Among others, a young woman speaking about gender-based discrimination noted that "I went to [an aid organization], but they just toss me around without offering any help";[20] two other women relayed how "staff insult you,"[21] and "[t]he counsellors at [an aid organization] say, 'For you Congolese, we are tired of your lies.'"[22] Some people in Kampala furthermore expressed their fear of being forcibly repatriated.[23] Such criticism is similar to that voiced by refugees in Kyaka II, but those in the city were less dependent on government authorities and aid organizations – as also indicated by the fact that not all interlocutors had actually accessed assistance in Kampala.

The little protection and assistance ultimately led to refugees' overall challenging and poor living conditions in Kampala. Insufficient housing, lack of food, poor nutrition, limited access to public services, and the risk of violence were regularly mentioned here. One man referred to the range of issues he and his family faced:

> The life we are leading here is full of threats. There are many issues: We are unable to take our children to school because of the hard life we are leading. We have no ability to educate them. Different sicknesses also are disturbing us. When we take our sick people to the hospital we are not handled the same way [as] the nationals. When they hear you speaking a foreign language, they start looking at you with a bad eye. If you are lucky, they can just accept to attend to you at the end of the day when

19 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 February 2017, Kampala.
20 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 25 November 2016, Kampala.
21 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 February 2017, Kampala.
22 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 February 2017, Kampala.
23 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2017, Kampala.

> they are closing. And you find that the service they are giving you is not good at all. Another one is that we are living in a very bad condition. There are places where we cannot go; they tell us that we are not supposed to move anyhow because we are not nationals. So even at offices they tell us to be careful when we are moving. And should not move anyhow.[24]

Although economic conditions were generally perceived as more lucrative in Kampala than in the camp, hardships and lack of income resulted in a number of interlocutors noting that they were unable to hold down a place of residence; others recounted staying with friends for a short time, while an additional number became homeless and had to sleep on the streets.[25] One woman from Somalia complained that the small business she runs "isn't enough to support my needs because the returns are low [and] oftentimes I feel helpless." She added that "sometimes there [are] petty thieves who come by and steal stuff or even attack you when moving on the road."[26] Another woman from DR Congo who takes care of her niece after the latter's parents were murdered by rebels in the conflict explained, "Sometimes I lack money for food, [school] fees for my niece, and rent. I have very little capital, so my business has failed to grow. Sometimes I have too many debts."[27] She added that problems and worries accumulate because she is single and solely responsible for the household, noting also that being single was a personal choice to avoid suffering domestic violence, which is prevalent. A man from Burundi similarly stressed that "I have no money, no property now. I have not reached where I want to be in life. Becoming a refugee has really set me back. I am missing out. I have lost everything."[28]

Far from receiving protection and security, many interlocutors feared harassment, arbitrary arrest, confiscation of property, and threats of imprisonment by the police. One man whose brother had experienced this first-hand explained, "[i]f it is around ten to eleven at night, I will fear moving. I fear the police. They may arrest you,

24 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kampala.
25 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 12 December 2016, Kampala; man from Burundi, 23 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 July 2017, Kampala.
26 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala.
27 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
28 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

imprison you, and you have to pay to get out of prison, and yet you may not have the money."[29] Such fears and indeed experiences of discrimination also occurred in other settings in which refugees sought to access services, such as in hospitals or schools. Interlocutors noted often having to wait longer at hospitals, being bypassed by nationals, and, when meeting with physicians, being treated harshly or even denied medical attention.[30] A woman vividly remembered a stressful day in one of Kampala's hospitals: "At the hospital they discriminate [against] us, saying, 'If we go to Congo we cannot be treated, but for you, you are coming to share our little medicine with us.'"[31]

While such risks were widespread, those to women were discussed with particular frequency. One woman from DR Congo explained how urban life is accompanied by many gendered risks and difficulties. In addition to problems in generating income, she also referred to the prevalence of gender-based violence: "Being single now comes with its own problems. Some men just assume you are always available and willing. They want to force me to have sex."[32] Moreover, a number of other women told us how landlords suddenly increased their rent or requested "sexual favours" in return for renting them a place.[33]

Risks of violence are particularly intense for LGBTQ+ refugees in the city,[34] becoming even worse of late given the Ugandan government's adoption of an Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2014 and then again in 2023. Anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination is widespread, as in Uganda any sexual orientation beyond heterosexuality is widely understood as deviant. This results in extreme discrimination as well as violence against LGBTQ+ people, in addition to their social exclusion. Interlocutors described these experiences as deeply distressing. They told of being rejected within their homes and families due to their sexual orientation and further experiencing physical assaults in

29 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2017, Kampala.
30 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 June 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kampala.
31 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 June 2017, Kampala.
32 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
33 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 January 2017, Kampala; man from South Sudan, dialogue, 16 March 2017, Kampala.
34 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was conducted exclusively by Krause.

public.[35] Such harassment and discrimination was so widespread that many sought to remain "invisible" in Kampala,[36] and looked for support primarily within the LGBTQ+ community.[37] Individuals with whom close contact has been maintained over the years explained that deteriorating conditions in 2023 contributed to many LGBTQ+ refugees fleeing to other countries, especially Kenya. Hence, many saw no other way than to seek safety elsewhere. And yet, research shows that conditions for LGBTQ+ refugees are highly difficult there too (e.g., Camminga 2020; Krause and Segadlo 2024).

The overall situation worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[38] Those who had relied on casual labour, hawking, or small businesses prior to the pandemic often suddenly lost their means of income. Uganda's nationwide lockdown limited the movement of all save those working in critical infrastructure like health-care facilities, thus hindering most livelihood strategies, access to medical care, psychosocial counselling, as well as creating issues with accommodation in the city (Gato 2020). Sources of survival were particularly problematic. The resulting impacts were voiced most clearly by a woman from Rwanda who could no longer sell handmade necklaces on the streets of Kampala once the lockdown started in March 2020. She said that her children henceforth showed signs of malnutrition: "Getting [something] to eat is a very big problem and my children's hair has turned yellowish because of lack of food."[39] This was also highlighted by others, with one person stressing how "many are now starving, and access to medical treatment is bad."[40] Although the government distributed food to everyone in the city regardless of legal status, rations were often insufficient or distribution did not take place in the immediate neighbourhood: "Urban refugees are not accessing food due to travel restrictions associated with [the] high transport cost to their original distributing centres like settlements."[41]

35 Due to the prevailing risks, we further anonymize references here. Dialogue, 7 November 2016, Kampala.
36 Dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; dialogue, 20 June 2017, Kampala.
37 Dialogue, 10 January 2021, Kampala.
38 As noted, data was collected via a qualitative questionnaire in the context of a subsequent research project (see chapter 1).
39 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 13 June 2020, Kampala.
40 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 25 January 2021.
41 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 24 January 2021.

Coupled with the economic issues and shortcomings outlined above, these risks of social exclusion, discrimination, and gender-based violence link back to the criticism Bengekya Mugay Gédéon raises in his poem *Just Because I'm a Refugee*. These issues shape individuals' everyday lives in the city and underline how seeking refuge does not necessarily mean finding safety. Instead, they must persist in efforts to create safe spaces for themselves and with others. Studies criticize the wide-ranging challenges that arise in urban areas too; in addition to the overall limited aid structures and services provided, refugees are frequently confronted with restricted access to labour markets, insufficient and insecure housing, and difficulties in public services (Buscher 2013; Netto 2011). Language barriers complicate their interaction with nationals, while risks such as sexual and racial discrimination and violence oftentimes remain prevalent (e.g., Campbell 2006; Naggujja et al. 2014; Bartolomei 2015; Pittaway 2015; Yotebieng et al. 2018).

Restrictive Aid System in Kyaka II

Kyaka II presents a stark contrast to the urban environment of Kampala. Nestled in the rural expanses of Kyegegwa District, the camp is situated some seventy to eighty kilometres from the nearest town. Its secluded location becomes evident after one veers off the main asphalt highway onto a red soil path that meanders through sparsely populated countryside. The camp's boundaries are not marked by demarcations such as fences, borders, or guards; rather, it blends in with its surroundings. Yet, one is immediately aware of having arrived at Kyaka II's base camp, as a number of large signs from government and humanitarian agencies prominently mark the core of the camp. In this way, Kyaka II merges with its surroundings while simultaneously standing out as a dedicated space for refugees' shelter, assistance, and control.

As is common for camps in Uganda, and in fact globally, Kyaka II is governed by OPM and UNHCR, while a number of NGOs provide aid primarily seeking to foster refugees' self-reliance. Spanning about eighty-four square kilometres, Kyaka II is structured into nine zones and twenty-six clusters with village-like set-ups and a relatively central base camp (UNHCR 2014b). The base camp is a crucial hub as it hosts the offices of government authorities and aid organizations, a police station, a market, the Bujubuli Health Centre providing

in-patient and outpatient medical care, and safe houses offering short-term shelter for people at immediate risk of harm. While many services are centralized at the base camp, some support structures are also installed across the camp area where the inhabitants live, including water-access points, six primary schools, and one secondary school. Markets exist in different clusters, and are set up and maintained by residents, not the aid organizations. Moreover, Ugandans live around and partly in the camp territory, and they are allowed to access services like medical support and education as part of development-oriented approach to avoid parallel service structures and conflicts.

AID APPARATUS WITH A FOCUS ON SELF-RELIANCE IN THE CAMP

Upon their arrival, registration, and status determination, refugees typically receive ration cards, some key non-food items like plastic sheeting, a jerry can, mats, blankets, two plots of land – one for residence, and one for farming – and access to services.[42] Afterwards, they quickly learn about the aid landscape, the world of acronyms and abbreviations denoting various organizations and services, and the power dynamics in the camp. In the humanitarian logic, they become beneficiaries, EVIs, PSNs, or perhaps even CHWs, are taught about SRS and also FRRM, and they might be granted access to SGBV protection, CBT, CSB, or TSFP.[43] Familiarizing themselves with the humanitarian language is crucial for individuals to manoeuvre the aid landscape.

The services cover a range of different sectors, including health care, nutrition, education, protection, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), infrastructure and housing, and community services. The multi-faceted aid measures are decided upon and provided from the top down – *by* government authorities and aid organizations *for* refugees.[44] At the time of research, OPM was in charge of the overall

42 Authority figure, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

43 EVI stands for extremely vulnerable individual, PSN for persons with specific needs, CHWs for community health workers, SRS for Self-Reliance Strategy, FRRM for feedback, referral, and resolution mechanisms, SGBV for sexual and gender-based violence, CBT for cash-based transfers, CSB for corn-soy blend, and TSFP for Targeted Supplementary Feeding Programme.

44 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

camp management, security, and land allocation, and UNHCR covered supervision, security, and protection. Protection measures were primarily delivered by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in addition to Africa Humanitarian Action (AHA), UNICEF, and Windle Trust International, while WASH measures were implemented by the African Initiative for Relief and Development and DRC. Food assistance was provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) and Samaritan's Purse, livelihood support by the FRC and DRC, and environmental projects by NSAMIZI. Health was mainly covered by AHA, and education by the FRC and Windle Trust International (see also UNHCR 2018b). To design and deliver projects, aid workers of different organizations meet regularly to make plans, discuss progress within and across the organizations, avoid repetition, and collaborate to provide integrated and multi-sectoral support.[45] During our research, we did not witness any meetings in which refugees were present – neither did any interlocutor mention being allowed to take part.

To better understand what these aid measures mean in practice, three areas are central: the ongoing ascription of vulnerability, the promotion of self-reliance, and the participatory approach. First, these diverse services are supposed to be offered to all refugees regardless of their gender, origin, or age[46] – at least on paper. In addition to some measures that target particular groups, vulnerability is a core benchmark for access to aid services. The former specialized measures include the provision of primary and secondary education and some protection measures for children and youth,[47] as well as protection of women against gender-based violence and training on their rights, empowerment, and subsequent encouragement to become self-reliant.[48] Moreover, the whole aid system in Kyaka II centres on vulnerability as a key criterion. Aid organizations seek to provide assistance to the most vulnerable, especially vulnerable, people at

45 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 6 December 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 18 November 2016, Kyaka II.

46 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 November 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

47 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II.

48 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.

risk, or persons with specific needs – to name just some of the notions reflected in abbreviations such as EVIs and PSNs. Those who are categorized as vulnerable are said to receive prioritized access to all aid services and additional support.[49] Hence, being labelled vulnerable can have material benefits.

However, according to aid workers, vulnerability is only ascribed to women and children.[50] Men and LGBTQ+ people[51] are widely noted as remaining excluded from prioritized support.[52] This corresponds with Butler's (2016) critique of projected vulnerability imposed on certain individuals or groups, although the underlying reasons differ. The approach in Uganda inherently reflects heteronormative structures and resonates with widespread criticism in research about gender stereotypes in humanitarian systems worldwide – with the portrayal of women as vulnerable and in need of help, in contrast to men's strength and violence (e.g., Grabska 2011; Ikanda 2018; Klassen 2022; Welfens 2023; Papada 2023). LGBTQ+ people are largely neglected as they do not fit the imaginary binarity (see also Shakhsari 2014; Pincock 2020; Saleh 2020). Such gender essentialism victimizes women, maintains the category of "womenandchildren" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014a, 398; in line with Enloe 2014, 1), and renders others invisible (see also Olivius 2016; Krause 2016a; Turner 2019; Ruzibiza and Berckmoes 2022).

Building on this logic, government authorities and aid organizations legitimize projects oriented toward an attempt to *de-vulnerablize* refugees. Which brings us to the second area: Fostering self-reliance is at the core of the entire aid apparatus. Although presumably in opposition, these two concepts are strongly linked. This ascription of vulnerability leads to a dichotomized humanitarian understanding of *weak* versus *strong* refugees, those *(still) vulnerable* versus those *(already made) self-reliant*. The focus on self-reliance thus only affects *what*

49 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

50 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 18 November 2016, Kyaka II.

51 As reflected before, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

52 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II; discussion with two women and two men, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 12 November 2016, Kyaka II.

assistance is delivered, while the *how* remains the same traditional top-down approach, leaving intact the perception of refugees as people depending on humanitarian support, insufficient as it may be. This resonates with research about refugees being treated as "objects of state of the art humanitarian programmes" (Turner 2016, 144). Mugisho argues similarly that "[i]nternational organisations and NGOs often treat refugees as burdens that need to be taken care of rather than as human beings capable of taking care of ourselves" (2023).

More concretely, OPM allocates land on the basis of first come, first served.[53] Following the logic of a temporary stay in the camp, permanent structures are forbidden.[54] Besides some livestock (goats and cattle), people cultivate maize, beans, groundnuts, matoke and sweet bananas, cassava, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and fruits such as mango, avocado, passion fruit, papaya, and pineapple (see also Tusiime et al. 2018, 12). Farming represents not only the key political objective but is crucial because government authorities and aid organizations reduced the overall level of assistance over time. Refugees thus have little choice but to farm – in the name of becoming self-reliant. They use the harvest for their own consumption and to sell it in Kyaka II's markets,[55] which residents organize across the camp – and the government levies taxes on the harvest as well (see also Tusiime et al. 2018, 12–15).

Most aid projects across the various sectors are tied to this self-reliance approach in one way or another. Livelihood support involves the distribution of seedlings and distribution of land, protection frequently revolves around disputes over land, medical care is often needed due to the exhausting effects of farming and poor nutrition, and these nutrition problems, due to scarce harvests, lead to ongoing needs for food assistance.[56] This creates a paradox as these support measures are ultimately necessitated by the adverse impacts of farming.

53 Family or ethnic relations are said not to matter, although it is partly claimed to be the case (see chapter 5).

54 Authority figure, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

55 Woman from Burundi, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2016, Kyaka II.

56 E.g., aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II; authority figure, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.

For more than twenty years now, studies have been criticizing that refugees cannot cultivate enough food for survival, let alone achieve self-reliance, due to poor soil conditions, insufficient space, and unceasing land use without fallowing drains (see Beaudou et al. 2003; Kaiser 2006; Ahimbisibwe 2014; Sebba and Zanker 2022; Grześkowiak 2024) – issues that most interlocutors stressed too[57] (see below). Yet, far from improving, things have worsened in recent years. After the influx of people seeking asylum in Uganda, OPM reduced the plots from their original size of one hundred by fifty metres per household before 2017 to fifty by fifty metres in 2017 and thirty by thirty metres in 2018 (Danish Refugee Council 2018, 2, 4). One may argue that government authorities and aid organizations have also expanded the self-reliance approach to encompass "off-farm" opportunities (e.g., Government of Uganda et al. 2017, 14) and increased vocational training programs in such areas as carpentry, hairdressing, and tailoring, support for savings and loan schemes, and promotion of small businesses.[58] While true, the camps' remoteness and the inherent focus on self-reliance mean that agriculture remains dominant.

The whole arrangement is highly problematic. The self-reliance approach homogenizes all refugees as farmers regardless of their professional background and aspirations, and it transfers the responsibility for becoming self-reliant onto them in a neoliberal sense (see also Ilcan and Rygiel 2015; Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018; Krause and Schmidt 2020). Following Ramsay's (2020) research on the political economy of aid, Uganda's system reflects a form of humanitarian exploitation contributing to precarities. The asymmetric power relations illustrate the structural discrepancy between humanitarian aid *for* refugees and practices *of* refugees vis-à-vis self-reliance: While the agencies with their administrative structures create restrictions and dependencies, they simultaneously expect refugees to become self-reliant within the same limiting structures. The reduction of self-reliance primarily to the production of food indispensable to life makes this

57 E.g., woman from Burundi, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, discussion with two women and two men, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II.

58 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II.

solely about survivability (Evans and Reid 2013, 91–3; Krause and Schmidt 2020, 34). This neglects other factors crucial to self-reliant lives such as well-being and independence, leading to a shift in perception from "positive adaption despite adversity to positive adaption to adversity" (Bottrell 2009, 334).

This is demonstrated by many interlocutors' critiques of the top-down decision making,[59] which leads to the third area: These hierarchical structures contradict aid workers' repeated emphasis that services are based on and delivered through participatory approaches.[60] Such endeavours are said to constitute cross-cutting issues that are supposed to be included throughout the entire project cycle, from planning to evaluation, which resembles UNHCR's community-development approach that considers "refugees as active partners in assistance and protection activities, rather than passive recipients" (2005, 1). In addition to mentioning supporting groups (more below), aid workers repeatedly referred to participatory or community-based assessments, with one insisting that "assessments must be done … [and] already centre on the refugees."[61]

Despite frequent mention, none of the aid workers we were able to speak in detail about how exactly such assessments or other participatory means were carried out, and what participation actually meant in practice. Instead, the language in which they addressed refugees' participation reveals that the top-down structures prevail. For example, they spoke of doing "a participatory assessment once a year … [via] a focus group discussion,"[62] mentioned "involving the beneficiaries" in projects,[63] noted "our community workers are assessing how refugees are progressing" in self-reliance,[64] and even stressed that "some refugees are employed by the agencies as interpreters, extension workers, cleaners. Those community-based structures are

59 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.
60 E.g., aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II; aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II.
61 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.
62 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II.
63 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.
64 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II.

elementary."[65] We doubt that cleaning aid workers offices can in any way count as participation in the aid system. Moreover, the positions of interpreters, extension workers, and community workers cannot be considered meaningful participation as they essentially reflect un(der)paid, short-term jobs under the lead of aid workers (on meaningful participation, see Milner et al. 2022). This is emphasized by a group of interpreters describing how their self-organized initiative to provide labour for the agencies as well as advice for other refugees were met with little support, let alone acknowledgment and respect.[66] Hence, the government authorities and aid organizations continue to monopolize decision-making roles and ultimately decide the modes and scopes of refugees' involvement (see also Cooke and Kothari 2001; Muggah 2005; Omata 2017b).

Refugees' Experiences of the Aid Apparatus in Kyaka II

Time and again, interlocutors criticized the aid apparatus and camp life and told of being confronted with top-down decision making, degrading treatment by aid workers, insufficient aid, a lack of food and everyday goods, and insecurity such as sexual and gender-based violence – all this from a humanitarian system that is supposed to protect and assist them. For many, Uganda's refugee regime and life as a refugee in the camp meant being a person who "doesn't have enough,"[67] who is "pushed back in life,"[68] and who "lives in poverty"[69] and in "suffering."[70]

The hierarchical system is immediately visible when entering Kyaka II's base camp as queues of refugees waiting to meet with aid workers form in front of offices. Such power asymmetries persist throughout the camp, one physical marker being the large white four-wheel-drive vehicles with the logos of organizations that come and

65 Aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II.
66 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
67 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.
68 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II.
69 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II.
70 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 December 2016, Kyaka II.

go while refugees move by foot, bike, or *boda boda* (motorbike taxi). Interlocutors lamented how "they [aid workers] are passing with their vehicles and for you, you are sitting here suffering,"[71] how aid workers "don't care"[72] about requests for help, or even "despise you when you go to the offices, when you seeking assistance,"[73] and how their treatment of refugees is "unfair."[74] The feeling of having to beg for assistance, which frequently remains scarce, shapes life as a refugee. One man highlighted that "they should start treating us like human beings and not animals. They should stop the prejudice and do something that is right."[75] These quotes illustrate how, for many, the treatment they received from aid workers' and their experience of life in encampment was degrading, dehumanizing, and disrespectful.

The pressure to engage in agriculture was a particular problem that interlocutors widely criticized. For example, one woman stressed that, "[f]or us as refugees, our job is to dig. That is all we do."[76] One man further noted that the Ugandan government's approach is "the big problem" as it "force refugees to dig and afterwards they buy the crops … Refugees are working here like slaves."[77] The effects of bad seasons, poor soil quality, and significant land reduction are thus acute. Interlocutors said that the small pieces of land are simply not enough for sufficient yields – and hence survival.[78] Alongside constant worries about food, interlocutors highlighted that they are barely able, if at all, to afford any additional necessities such as soap, schooling, clothes, and similar things: "You cannot get enough food with one plot. You cannot have the money to even pay for school. The climate now is also changing, and the harvest is poor. The land has been reduced so much. We do not know how to deal with this

71 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.
72 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
73 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2017, Kyaka II.
74 Discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II.
75 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
76 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.
77 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kyaka II.
78 E.g., discussion with two women and three men from DR Congo, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Burundi, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

challenge."[79] How negatively people are affected by these circumstances became particularly clear in a discussion, whereby a man from DR Congo described how he had never felt at ease since seeking refuge in Uganda:

> After reaching here, there are some times when I think I would have better stayed and died. In [DR] Congo, we could go and hide, but here when you are hungry, you cannot hide somewhere from it. You have to stay at your home, and the hunger will cause trouble with your wife and your neighbours. You can say there is peace, but there is no peace when you are hungry. The problems here are sometimes overwhelming. They distribute just too little for big families.[80]

The lack of livelihoods therefore contributes to widespread poverty among the people in Kyaka II, negatively affecting their daily lives through such issues as limited prospects for children,[81] health problems,[82] and also increased levels of crime and violence, especially gender-based violence.[83] The absence of stable income frequently forces children to drop out of school when the cost of school fees, books, pens, and similar become too much to handle. Some children must instead work to support their families. One man narrated how his family's "land was cut," and the remaining parcel was just not enough to feed a family of twelve, let alone afford school fees. "They go and work for others and they can get some money or a bunch of matooke and we can eat," he said. "That's how we survive."[84]

Especially for girls, the strains of household poverty can lead to forced and early marriage. Given the common practice of bride price, families receive financial or material compensation such as "two

79 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.
80 Man from DR Congo, discussion with two women and two men, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II.
81 Discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.
82 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II.
83 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.
84 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

cows."[85] Recounting her family's poor conditions, one young woman said, "I had a sister and she was married because there was no way she could stay home."[86] This reveals how economic desperation compels some families to view early marriage as a means of economic relief, despite the risks that are likely to arise for the girls.

Risks of violence such as theft, assault, and particularly sexual abuse and domestic violence are prevalent. This not only stands in stark contrast to the notion that camps such as Kyaka II should be humanitarian sites of protection but also underscores how camp conditions contribute to violence (see also Wachter et al. 2018; Krause 2020, 2021; Ruzibiza and Berckmoes 2022). The cases that interlocutors addressed are caused by, or inherently related to, the poor livelihood conditions and restrictions in the camp. The theft of food, livestock, and other everyday goods such as cleaning materials, electronic devices, and clothing reflects that.[87] Moreover, physical assault, domestic violence, and sexual abuse are said to occur and prevail due to the limited livelihoods, the hierarchical camp governance, and the frustration of precarious conditions. Interlocutors explained how tensions arise in families as well as neighbourhoods over scarce resources, and these frequently turns violent. This is particularly the case during harvest seasons. While these times offer an opportunity for some earnings, frustration persists, and some men would "go and drink alcohol"[88] without sharing the harvest or earnings with their families. Especially when people are still intoxicated, risks of assault and abuse increase. Women as well as men emphasized these problems,[89] echoing the explanation of one woman that, "when the

85 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.

86 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with three young women and three young men, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

87 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

88 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.

89 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kyaka II.

wife asks about that, she can be beaten."[90] The severity of "beatings" against women and children sometimes forces them to "sleep outside or at a friend's house" for safety.[91]

These risks are furthermore tied to the top-down hierarchies of the aid apparatus. Interlocutors generally explained that *being a man* is associated with the ability to decide and provide for oneself, one's wife, and one's family. Yet, government authorities and aid organizations, with their projects, imposed decisions and restrictions on camp residents. Many men explained that they are unable to fulfill their expected roles and feel they have lost their social status.[92] Such feelings of social degradation are discussed as perceptions of *emasculation* in research (e.g., Lukunka 2011; Ritchie 2018; for a critical reflection on the term *emasculation*, see Schulz 2018; Krause 2021, 184). Instead, government and aid organizations ultimately assumed the role of decision maker and provider – without actually offering sufficient support.

As in Kampala, these conditions were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with existing problems becoming worse and new ones arising. People noted that "food security, health services, access to education, [and] access to justice"[93] were among the major challenges they faced especially due to lockdowns and restrictions on movement. One man criticized the shortages of food as "rations were cut by 30 per cent, while imposed lockdowns restricted refugees from venturing for food outside the settlements."[94] He further lamented that relevant information and practical means of self-protection were hardly provided at the beginning of the pandemic: "Refugees do not have access to personal protection equipment including face masks, hand sanitizers, and soaps. Misinformation and disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic [proliferates]."[95] This led to acute concerns, risks, and limitations on people's livelihoods. As one woman explained, "[m]

90 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
91 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.
92 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, discussion with two women and two men, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, discussion with three young women and three young men, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.
93 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 28 January 2021.
94 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 3 February 2021.
95 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 3 February 2021.

onths of nearly shutdown has affected small-scale businesses, especially of women that affected whole families [i.e., food insecurity and/or unbalanced diets]. Closure of educational institutions left children stranded without education for nearly one year, including safe spaces; and, besides learning, regular meals such as lunch were no longer available."[96] Interlocutors also noted that gender-based violence, and particularly domestic abuse,[97] intensified with the pandemic's onset, "due to rising economic challenges."[98]

These critical conditions led some interlocutors to compare life in the camp to that in a prison,[99] where one is unable to move freely, attend institutions of higher learning, pursue a career, or have a social life comfortable and enjoyable to them. Instead, they must obey humanitarian rule and dig, regardless of the likelihood of self-reliance, and regardless of their former profession or occupational interests. One man stressed, "I am not educated for digging!" and explained how he used to work for humanitarian agencies in DR Congo. "But in those five years here, I am not reading, I am not writing, I don't develop plans in my head, so there is a retardation for those who are educated."[100] Many described how, having been subjected to the top-down decision making of government authorities and aid organizations and the difficulties of camp life, felt powerless to change their situations.

These challenges resonate once again with the various problems that Bengekya Mugay Gédéon highlights in his poem *Just Because I'm a Refugee*. The challenges also expressively illustrate the character of encampment despite the critical use of the term settlement. The harsh conditions, diverse restrictions, and prolonged uncertainties that interlocuters described in Kyaka II correspond also with research debates about encampment globally; criticized as "a form of human warehousing and 'storage' of refugees" (Jaji 2012, 227) and "spatial technologies of control and immobility" (Brankamp 2022, 107), the powerful structures of encampment are readily apparent. Aid actors become "humanitarian governments" managing refugees (Agier 2011, 196) through measures of care, whose flip side is often a significant degree of control; thus, under the guise of protection and assistance, camps essentially serve as containment politics, existing as techniques of

96 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 25 January 2021.
97 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 25 January 2021.
98 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 26 January 2021.
99 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.
100 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

order and control (Fassin 2012; Minca 2015; McConnachie 2016). Studies frequently refer to Agamben (1998) to critique camps as spaces of exception and refugees' bare life, in addition to linking camp dynamics to Foucault's ([1997] 2004) concept of biopolitics, where the camp functions as a site of governance that regulates and manages life itself (Diken 2004; Puggioni 2006; Nyers 2013; Tuastad 2017). Mbembe's (2019) notion of necropolitics can also be applied to camps, reflecting the power to dictate not only how people live but also the conditions under which life is made precarious or disposable. In this sense, the camp becomes not just a space of control but one where the sovereignty over life and death manifests starkly, limiting refugees' agency and shaping the forms of violence, neglect, and abandonment they face.

However, these problems do not mean that refugees lack agency. A growing body of research attests that they continuously practise agency in multi-faceted ways as they resist, adapt to, and transform the circumstances within these adverse settings. Refugees navigate restrictive environments by engaging in informal economies, contributing to justice and peace, and creating spaces of meaning and belonging within the camp's confines (Horst 2006; Oka 2011; Ntegyerize and Onyoin 2016; Bradley et al. 2019). Additionally, acts of defiance – whether subtle, such as negotiating rules, or overt, such as organizing protests – demonstrate their capacity to challenge and reshape the structures that seek to govern their lives (Abdi 2006; Ilcan 2014; Veronese et al. 2020; Katz 2022; Schmidt 2023). A key collective practice is forming social networks and self-organizing, which we will discuss in the chapters ahead.

"A GROUP IS AN ASSET": HUMANITARIAN CONTROL OVER AND (MIS)USE OF REFUGEE GROUPS

Refugee aid and the promotion of self-reliance focuses not solely on individuals; government and aid organizations also underscore the significance of refugees' collective endeavours. But in what ways and why do these organizations engage with refugees' collectives? In the following section, we show that their approach does not aim to support refugees to self-organize as they want to. Instead, the promotion of collective endeavours serves humanitarian interests only. "A group is an asset,"[101] recounted one aid worker, indicating the strategic

101 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

value placed on groups. We identify and analyze three areas in which organizations instrumentalize refugees' collectives: first, by using refugee groups as humanitarian tools to promote economic self-reliance; second, by establishing refugee committees to outsource humanitarian responsibilities; and third, by bandwagoning on refugees' self-organizations and their activities for humanitarian purposes. Through these strategies, government authorities and aid organizations exert control over refugees. However, this does not translate into passive compliance from refugees; rather, they actively navigate and negotiate the challenges in their everyday lives.

Refugee Groups as a Humanitarian Tool for Collective Self-Reliance

Aid organizations' involvement with refugee groups is nothing new. Indeed, it is part of the wider humanitarian-development nexus for which working with groups has been key for a long time. In fact, this has been a prominent global strategy in development co-operation since the 1970s with the emergence of the basic needs approach. Marking a shift from large-scale, infrastructure-focused projects to community-centred, participatory forms of development, the approach emphasized the importance of providing populations affected by poverty with direct access to needed resources and services like food, education, and health care. This approach was enhanced during the 1970s and '80s through participatory development, which sought to empower groups and communities as active participants in development rather than passive recipients of aid (Cornwall 2006). Respective strategies also emerged in global refugee aid, with people-oriented planning representing an early example (e.g., UNHCR 1992) that paved the way for further community-based endeavours (e.g., UNHCR 2005, 2008, 2024a; UNHCR ExCom 2001, 2013).

Refugee groups are still assigned a pivotal role in the contemporary aid apparatus of Kyaka II. These groups are particularly emphasized in the humanitarian sector of livelihood in order to foster self-reliance. Prominent examples are farming collectives, livestock groups, and savings groups, but other economic groups are partly also promoted – or allowed. The significance attributed to such groups is evident in the so-called livelihood groups inventory, a database maintained by government and aid organizations at the time of research. It catalogued fifty-nine such livelihood collectives, mainly focusing on

agriculture, livestock rearing, and to some extent savings, with groups ranging in size from ten to twenty members.

While the formation and engagement of refugees in such groups may initially appear as self-organization, this process is not entirely voluntary or self-driven. Instead, governments and aid organizations encourage – or actually compel – individuals to group together for strategic interests. This is underscored by the aid worker who stressed that "a group is an asset." He explained that while an individual may not be able to meet an expected output (e.g., harvest or income) for self-reliance, a group is more likely to do so due to the pressure from the collective. "We can't do things individually … So we have to tell people form groups," he added.[102] Given the constraints of international funding for refugee aid, this group focus could be understood as an efficient strategy to ensure wide reach and promotion of self-reliance. Yet, the groups turn into humanitarian tools through which government and aid organizations control, govern, and steer refugees' economic practices and enforce collective responsibilities to ensure aid efficiency. Groups are thus imposed critical multiplier functions in the aid apparatus.

To this end, the organizations incentivize the formation and operation of livelihood groups by offering the prospect of some additional support – but only if the authorities deem the groups' ideas economically viable and profitable for self-reliance. This support is promised in the form of limited short-term funding or a small plot of land. These incentives are already communicated when people arrive in Kyaka II, as one man recounted: "They told us to form small groups and begin doing some money-making activities and that eventually they will come in and support us."[103] To qualify for support, the groups have to be operational, a stipulation rooted in the humanitarian logic of building on existing capabilities. An aid worker said accordingly that "our principle is we don't support you from zero. You must have a stake in what you are doing. There must be evidence that in whatever we are going to support you have initiated something."[104] For their applications, groups must prepare and submit a clear statute with bylaws that outline how they operate, a business plan, and proof of

102 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.
103 Woman from Burundi, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II.
104 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II.

some initial capital; the bylaws should specify difference roles, including chair, vice-chair, counsellor, secretary, and representative.[105]

However, the entire selection process is highly opaque. The assessment of groups' economic profitability, the selection of groups for discussions, and the final decision on potential support, including its scope, are solely at the discretion of the government and aid organizations. This opacity is widely criticized by interlocutors,[106] including one man who recalled that "OPM also told the people to be more creative."[107] What this means remains unclear. Likewise, members of a group in its founding phase complained about the process. Their goal was to establish not just an economic group, but an initiative for youth aimed at securing a better future – a crucial endeavour given the protracted situation in Kyaka II. They recounted the challenges encountered while applying for funding, lamenting that the authorities ignored them and did not even read their proposal. They decided to attend a training from UNHCR in Kampala, and one member recalled the instructions they had received there: "You just do your own stuff and we will come to you. When you are coming to us you will only be disappointed and discouraged. So you better start something and we will come to you if we hear this group is a success."[108] This response and the opaque process were frustrating and discouraging for them, as such initial support would have helped them to get started.

This is not an isolated incident but rather signals biases toward androcentric structures. The focus on groups' economic profitability leads government and aid organizations to neglect the needs of specific groups, such as youth in this case, or aspects of everyday life, such as family and household responsibilities, in their assessments – even when groups address such concerns in proposals. The authorities' tendency to primarily recognize groups led by men is evident in the above-mentioned livelihood groups inventory; although it listed groups with women and men as members, most were led by men. In our research, we did not meet any livelihood groups formed by people

105 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II.

106 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II; discussion with six men, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II.

107 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II.

108 Discussion with five men, 7 July 2017, Kyaka II.

other than adult men that had received support in Kyaka II. The economic focus therefore contributes to placing adult men's groups in advantageous positions, perpetuating their role as provider traditionally ascribed to them based on gender. In turn, this diminishes the likelihood of success for women, youth, elderly, and LGBTQ+ people's groups, who do not seem to be understood as economically relevant and whose specific needs remain largely invisible here. This stands in contrast to earlier approaches; for instance, the SRS of the late 1990s highlighted the importance of groups in supporting women's economic activities (UNHCR and OPM 2004, vi).

Some aid organizations delegate the identification of groups to community workers, further complicating the process by adding another layer that groups seeking support must manage. Serving as intermediaries, such community workers wield considerable influence within the communities, as one man explained: "There is actually no activity going on in the village without my consent. Even if there is a group, they first have to pass through me and come to register. I can take them to my bosses."[109] Their influence does not emerge parallel to or beyond humanitarian structures; rather, organizations install them as buffers to outsource some of their work. This corresponds with Turner's finding that intermediaries in a refugee camp in Tanzania acquire "public authority" through power delegated by UNHCR or by exploiting gaps in the system (2006, 776). In Kyaka II, they become brokers and gatekeepers interpreting humanitarian regulations, which can contribute to their own interests (see also Vancluysen and Ingelaere 2020; Ozkul and Jarrous 2021).

Finally, government and aid organizations not only determine which groups should exist and be supported but also dictate how they should work. Contrary to the repeated assertion that refugees should independently create and design their own groups, the organizations intervene in the groups' objectives at any stage. For example, it is widely known among the residents of Kyaka II that groups must align with the humanitarian criteria and match livelihood priorities just to be considered for a meeting with the authorities – let alone receive support. Many thus changed their original objectives to meet such expectations.[110] Moreover, pre-existing groups that are indeed

109 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.

110 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

self-organized and have been operating for several years are said to have adapted their practices after aid organizations pressured them to do so, mainly by including a credit component.[111] An aid worker stressed the importance of such a saving approach: "So now ideally every group is complemented by a saving component. It is one of the strong binding factors. Groups who have it are more cohesive than groups without it. Because they have their money there. So they would like to know where their money is. So when you call them for a meeting it is easier than with a group which doesn't have this component."[112] This, however, has effects beyond the immediate group members involved, like when groups only make credit available to members at high interest rates. The inclusion of such a credit component can thus lead to prolonged, additional challenges for people.

The overall approach to and instrumentalization of groups is problematic. In light of the limited extent of support actually provided at the time of our research, these declared prospects of support prove to be merely a means of exerting control over groups and steering their work in directions that correspond with the agendas of government authorities and aid organizations. Many interlocutors distanced themselves from this control and instead navigated camp life on their own terms. To this end, they explained how they indeed self-organize in various groups to manage camp life and help each other. A key example where humanitarian assessments failed and refugees collectively mobilized their own resources concerns livestock. Early on in our research in Kyaka II, we came across one self-organization that wanted to breed, keep, and sell ducks. Members told us about the value of ducks, which people from certain regions of DR Congo appreciate and would thus buy. The collective applied for financial support from aid organizations, but the latter did not believe in the likely profitability and told them to breed chickens instead. However, just a month before, they had seen a neighbouring project with chickens fail and were therefore reluctant to engage in this endeavour – especially with no previous related experience. Instead, they decided to go ahead on their own. Although it took a while, they were able to save some money by themselves and proceeded to buy the first few ducks. Their initiative took off right away, with many people in

111 E.g., discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2017, Kyaka II.

112 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II.

Kyaka II wanting to buy ducks, and aid organizations then started to promote this initiative.[113] How wide-ranging such self-organized collective efforts are will be at the core of the chapters ahead.

Outsourcing of Humanitarian Responsibilities to Refugee Committees

The second approach in which government authorities and aid organizations instrumentalize refugees' collective efforts for humanitarian purposes is evident in so-called refugee committees. They are installed to facilitate various sectors such as protection, health, WASH, and livelihood, making them integral to the aid apparatus. This is rooted in and driven by considerations of social control and aid efficiency: Aid organizations strategically establish committees for service delivery and aid processes. As such, refugee committees operate under the leadership of certain aid organizations and are set up for and tasked with ensuring the functioning and maintenance of certain infrastructures – for example, water access points, health care or education, or even risk mitigation.[114]

Vulnerability is the key criterion here. Despite the diverse scopes of work, such committees share the common goal of reducing the vulnerabilities of camp residents. Some committees, such as SGBV groups, focus specifically on vulnerable individuals – also called EVIS, PSNS, or people at risk. Run by AHA at the time of research, the SGBV groups are tasked with supporting the prevention of, and protection from, gender-based violence. One woman explained how they concentrated on early marriage then and that "they gave us a role to watch the people, and if someone marries off a young child we notify them."[115] Moreover, education committees, managed by Windle Trust, engage with nurseries and are also instructed to "mobilize and construct houses for the schools"[116] to ensure the running of educational facilities, while health committees, headed by AHA, "oversee

113 Discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II.
114 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 November 2016, Kyaka II; aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II.
115 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.
116 Aid Worker, man from Uganda, interview, 18 November 2016, Kyaka II.

sanitation of individual households like checking on latrines, how they wash their dishes, etc."[117] Meanwhile, water committees, managed by DRC, are made responsible for the smooth operation of boreholes so camp residents have access to clean drinking water.

At first glance, this may seem to indicate that refugees manage parts of the aid apparatus, yet significant restrictions and challenges persist. Decisions about project design, implementation, and also the use of refugee committees remain under the control of government and aid organizations, while the burdens of maintenance are shifted to refugees. One aid worker even articulated this anticipated effect of committees, saying that "it is now their responsibility and not the responsibilities of the offices anymore."[118] This outsourcing and transfer of responsibilities imposes considerable financial and material burdens on them: Instead of at least having the prospect of support, members are rarely compensated for their work in committee, and they even have to cover much or even all of the costs arise therefrom. Such conditions place collective pressure on camp residents to participate in these committees and bear the costs.

This form of involvement thus does not set the stage for actual political, social, economic, and cultural participation (see also Kaiser 2005; Clark-Kazak 2011; Olivius 2014b; Janmyr 2022). Instead, it introduces problems, exemplified here by the case of water committees: The outsourcing results in camp residents having to pay a fee to the committee for water access as committee members cannot cover maintenance expenses. Those unable to afford the fee noted having to steal water or fetch dirty water from other sources.[119] Far from mitigating vulnerabilities, this approach exacerbates and introduced new forms of vulnerabilities for the inhabitants of Kyaka II (see also Schmidt 2023, 97–8).

An example worth noting here is the Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs). Unlike the other committees and groups, RWCs are an elected collective of refugee representatives found in all of Uganda's camps, including Kyaka II – but not in cities like Kampala. The bias toward camps indicates the strong influence of government and aid organizations; in fact, RWCs are initiated, supported, and maintained by the

117 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.
118 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 18 November 2016, Kyaka II.
119 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II; discussion with ten women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.

organizations (see also Gottschalk 2007; Ntegyerize and Onyoin 2016; Sebba and Zanker 2022). RWCs generally mirror Uganda's Local Council system with a three-tier structure: RWC I at the block level, RWC II at the village level, and RWC III overseeing the settlement level (Ntegyerize and Onyoin 2016, 13). At each level, RWCs consist of a chairperson and a vice-chairperson, besides additional members who serve as secretaries for law and order, education, finance, and other activities. Moreover, RWCs have subcommittees focusing on, for example, education or security.[120]

The extent to which RWCs are entangled in the day-to-day running of Kyaka II can be seen in the fact that OPM organizes elections for RWCs. Moreover, they are tasked with providing assistance and advice, mediating conflicts within communities, and settling civil-legal matters, thus carrying out roles in the camp's informal justice structure. RWCs are furthermore responsible for channelling information about individuals and communities to government authorities and aid organizations, and distribute the latter's information among the former.[121] The close contact with the organizations places RWC members in powerful positions, and they regularly meet at the offices of the government and aid organizations to "communicate on behalf of those in need."[122] Other studies also reflect these central roles, with Sebba and Zanker noting that RWCs "primarily serve … as a coordination and communication function working together with the OPM camp commandants" (2022, 34). Gidron argues that the position of RWCs "is first and foremost that of intermediaries between the world of 'government' and NGOs, and refugees" (2022, 20).

This prominence of RWCs in Uganda's refugee regime has grown over recent decades(e.g., UNHCR and OPM 2004; Government of Uganda et al. 2017; Government of Uganda 2018), and government and aid organizations in Kyaka II rely on RWCs' support. In spite of that, the camp authorities do not collaborate with them on an equal footing by involving them in decision-making processes. Instead, while they may be included in certain issues or discussions, they remain under the purview of the authorities. The latter also do not provide material resources to the RWCs or even pay them for their work. In stark contrast, RWC members told us, "[w]e are volunteering, not

120 Insights from dialogue with individuals on-site. To ensure they remain anonymous in the book, we do not list any identifying details here.
121 Anonymous.
122 Anonymous.

facilitated."[123] While this may appear to prevent direct conflicts of interest, RWC members spend significant time supporting the organizations – thus performing what is essentially unpaid labour.

The close connections with the organizations lead to hesitation among Kyaka II's residents. They fundamentally question the elections and doubt that they could elect leaders other than those suggested by OPM.[124] Consequently, interlocutors criticize the fact that RWCs belong to the camp's administrative body more than they are accepted as actual leaders. Some interlocutors express their reluctance, cautiously or directly, to engage with these entities because they have little trust in them.[125] For example, one man stressed that he would maintain "boundaries,"[126] while another lamented how he had to "bribe the RWC" to get some attention.[127]

Humanitarian Bandwagoning and Co-Optation of Existing Self-Organizations

The third area in which refugees' collectives are instrumentalized within the aid apparatus reflects how government and aid organizations harness their ideas for humanitarian purposes. Beyond influencing groups and installing committees, as discussed in the previous sections, the organizations also integrate and co-opt refugees' self-organizations and their work in humanitarian projects. These practices mirror the concept of bandwagoning, mainly applied in political science to capture the process by which a state aligns with a more powerful one or a coalition in order to meet certain strategic objectives (e.g., Mearsheimer 2001; Motin 2024), or one NGO adopts another's work or joins a coalition, thus leading to the proliferation of a given issue (e.g., Carpenter 2014; Breen and Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2024). Refugee-led organizations' bandwagoning may appear to be a pragmatic step given that these initiatives have proven to work in communities. It could even be applauded as a way for aid organizations to institutionalize refugees'

123 Anonymous.
124 Discussion with six men, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.
125 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
126 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
127 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II.

own strategies and thus take them seriously; yet, where these initiatives came from or who first took them are rarely acknowledged.

During the research, we found various everyday instances in both Kyaka II and Kampala where government authorities and aid organizations engaged in bandwagoning and co-opting refugee-led organizations. For example, NGOs in Kampala partly try to work with formalized self-organizations to use the networks and trust they have built-in communities.[128] Some interlocutors even spoke of exploitation of their organizations and efforts by aid agencies attempting to appropriate frequently accessed support structures.[129] Moreover, members of the self-organizations regularly share their experiences and expertise of the management of funding or alike with others in both informal settings and formal workshops; NGOs have recently begun to copy the approach by offering similar training for capacity building[130] – which, as noted above, none of the interlocutors are said to have attended. Given the minimal aid in Kampala, such approaches by aid actors could be viewed as attempts to strengthen structures. Yet, leaders of self-organizations hold reservations and criticize insufficient co-operation (see chapter 4).

Such issues also occur in Kyaka II, where they serve as cautionary examples for groups who want to initiate their own projects, as vividly discussed by several interlocutors. They explained various ways in which NGOs try to bandwagon on refugee-led organizations. For example, they took ownership of self-organizations' ideas and initiatives, including the foundation of a vocational school.[131] NGOs also attempted to use groups while changing their objectives; several groups, for example, were advised to alter their activity and include savings and loan components to be more economically effective.[132] One core instance represents the self-organized scout group; members

128 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.

129 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

130 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala; aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 March 2017, Kampala; aid worker, woman from Uganda, interview, 4 April 2017, Kampala.

131 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.

132 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

could not recall when exactly it was first founded in the camp, but they noted that scouts had been active for many years now.[133] The scout group aligned with the general ideas and activities of scouting worldwide, invoking respect, co-operation, and care as core principles. These values are learned among other ways by engaging in various outdoor activities; for example, they organized an event for survival skills where children learned to build their own shelter, make a fire, and other practical skills. Through such activities, they sought to develop safe spaces for children and youth, socialize with each other, build self-esteem, and especially learn from and with each other. At some point the group was approached by AHA, which sought to adopt the scouting approach in its work regarding the prevention of and protection from sexual and gender-based violence. This resulted in changes to the composition and work of the original scout group, which subsequently had to add additional activities for education about sexual and gender-based violence to its work. Windle Trust Uganda (2017, 12) also employed the scouting idea in its projects for child protection – though members of the group only spoke about their experience with AHA.

During a conversation with one member of the scout group about this co-operation with AHA,[134] he recognized several areas of overlap between scouting activities and AHA's initiatives. He mentioned things like AHA's prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, including its promotion of peaceful coexistence, non-violent conflict resolution, and economic empowerment and independence as common goals. He further noted that AHA's focus on "community participation" through volunteerism in communities aligns with the scouting approach of providing free support to those in need. However, he also criticized how AHA tried to force change in the original "scouting spirit" of self-organized voluntary work by youth. While the scouting intention was "for youth starting up this program," AHA sought to introduce monetary aspects. Similar to the aforementioned cases in which the organizations offer prospects of short-term funding for economically profitable groups, such incentives were only brought to the table if the scout group included certain activities. Although AHA succeeded to an extent, the scout member argued that the group has continued to ensure that boundaries are maintained and that AHA's activities do

133 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 July 2017, Kyaka II.
134 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 July 2017, Kyaka II.

not compromise scouting ideals. "They got one activity for 'no violence,' and this is it on SGBV. And that is what *they* are doing and *they* are teaching children," he emphasized, adding that "scouting is having very many activities for children."[135]

His explanations reflect the careful negotiation that group members engage in between aligning with others and sticking to their ideas. This negotiation, along with the emergence of parallel efforts, was also evident in an event hosted during the "16 days of activism against sexual and gender-based violence," facilitated by several aid organizations. In this context, the group organized a "scouting weekend" where children came together to learn and develop skills in camping, cooking, and survival. This included building tents out of natural materials behind the offices of aid organizations. At an adjacent site, AHA set up a tent where scouts presented some of the crafts they had made during the weekend, and two large pieces of paper where they wrote down rules they had developed to prevent sexual and gender-based violence. When we visited, they were in the middle of a competition about who had installed the "best camp" and thus displayed "survival skills." They took it very seriously, with some building toilets, storerooms, and community shelters. Another activity promoted by AHA involved making sanitary pads and bags for personal use and for sale, with the larger aim of promoting girls' economic self-reliance. As a part of this, "sensitization sessions" occurred on the topic of "surviving and coping" with challenges in the camp, during which scouts developed the aforementioned written rules.[136]

The bandwagoning effect evident here also emerges in other cases where the agencies not only adopt ideas and initiatives from refugees and their self-organizations but often also influence and modify them. One might see links to the recent debates about innovation and localization in the humanitarian and development sectors and understand such processes as indicative of innovating responses or localizing related practices – that is, by using bottom-up instead of top-down approaches and taking local and national actors and their strategies seriously (see also Krause 2013a; Bonacker et al. 2017; Erdilmen and Sosthenes 2020). Yet, Shuayb warns that much of the recent debate about localization "only pays lip service to fixing aid's colonial legacy"

135 Emphasis during the conversation, man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 July 2017, Kyaka II.

136 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 July 2017, Kyaka II.

(2022). We concur, seeing such bandwagoning as a key shortcoming given the fact that the original ideas and structures refugees build by self-organizing are rarely acknowledged as such within the aid apparatus. In contrast, the organizations tend to capture, control, and streamline them in keeping with their strategic interests.

Importantly, while the camp residents are encouraged to start their own initiatives according to humanitarian paradigms of self-reliance and community participation, their practices can go beyond or sometimes even against humanitarian or national regulations. Yet, paradoxically, when aid organizations bandwagon these ideas, they partly also change said regulations; this is not an ad hoc process, but rather one that takes significant time. A case in point is the abovementioned duck-breeding initiative initially rejected in Kyaka II, only to be later promoted there. That individuals do not simply give in, submit to the power practices, and hand over their ideas is evident in how, as the scout we spoke with stressed, the groups' original objectives are upheld, but also in other interlocutors expressing caution when interacting with the organizations. This reflects individuals navigating and negotiating humanitarian structures imposed on them and incorporating past experiences with humanitarian actors in their "expectation maintenance" surely informing futural actions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980–1).

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis shows the complex challenges that prevail in Uganda's humanitarian system. Despite the emphasis on fostering self-reliance and humanitarian notions of participation, refugees are not treated as autonomous actors – and neither are their self-organizations. Instead, top-down aid structures persist, refugees are insufficiently involved in political decision making, and imposed group or committee formations are frequently instrumentalized in the aid apparatus.

Explored through the notion of relational agency following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), we thus show how Uganda's refugee regime heavily shapes and limits refugees' agency by the existing hierarchical structures and policies that frame and dictate their practices and participation. These structures do not simply exist and prevail in the exact same way but are produced and reproduced through routinized interaction among actors within the aid apparatus. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 978) stress with reference to Giddens

(1991), "[t]he agentic dimension of routinized action lies precisely in the recursive implementation of structures by human actors." More concretely, this means people self-organize based on their previous experiences and adapt these to the actual conditions for which government and humanitarian authorities are largely responsible. These existing structural barriers are, however, often insufficiently considered by these authorities, particularly when emphasizing the capability of refugees while at the same time upholding barriers to utilizing their capabilities (see also Krause and Schmidt 2020).

Despite a reputation as progressive, Uganda's humanitarian system replicates restrictive patterns seen in the global refugee regime, where refugees are more often positioned as recipients rather than actors in decision making (e.g., Harrell-Bond 1986; Malkki 1995a; Agier 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014b). Moreover, their approach to refugees' self-organization remains focused on formalized types, promoting a one-size-fits-all model that can be seen in their support practices. Only formalized groups receive support, leaving out all the other types of self-organization – especially informal ones remaining unrecognized by the humanitarian administration. This echoes critical findings on participatory approaches, which highlight that participation is often highly constrained by top-down implementation, legal frameworks, political limitations, and economic incentives. Moreover, it is typically recognized only within externally defined criteria, ultimately neglecting or even altering people's own forms of engagement (Platteau and Abraham 2002; Muggah 2005; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010; Olivius 2014b).

One may argue that government and aid organizations have limited room to alter restrictive structures due to the chronic underfunding of support in Uganda's protracted situations. Indeed, by the end of 2018, for example, the response to refugees from DR Congo was funded at only 39 per cent, leaving 61 per cent underfunded (UNHCR 2019a, 55). This issue of insufficient responsibility sharing among states and scarce funding are deeply rooted in the global refugee protection regime (see Betts et al. 2012; Gottwald 2014; Milner 2016). The self-reliance approach may seem like the only feasible strategy here. Yet, this approach also paves the way for twisting funding logics: Whereas supporting refugees to become self-reliant legitimizes a brief increase in necessary support and funds in order to *make* them so, this (appears to) promises a respective decrease therein in the long run. Uganda's policies mention these intended reductions and aid effectiveness explicitly (e.g., UNHCR and OPM 2004, 11; Government

of Uganda et al. 2017, 20). In spite of that, the flawed reality has been known for decades: Refugees rarely achieve self-reliance through agriculture, instead remaining in highly challenging conditions and dependent on aid regardless (e.g., Beaudou et al. 2003; Kaiser 2006; Meyer 2006; Ahimbisibwe 2014).

These issues result in diverse challenges for displaced people in Uganda, which Bengekya Mugay Gédéon expressively highlights in his poem *Just Because I'm a Refugee*. While their own routinized practices in forming and maintaining self-organizations are crucial for dealing with such difficulties, their opportunities for exercising agency with sufficient scope to affect political decision making has been highly limited thus far. Whether this will change in the (near) future remains to be seen, but some recent developments hint at possibilities for structural change. Uganda's recent REHOPE strategy claims to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, noting that "refugee and host communities are integral partners in REHOPE," and that "[t]hey will be empowered to increasingly plan, oversee, implement, and account for REHOPE activities" (Government of Uganda et al. 2017, 15). While this strategy nonetheless continues the language of refugees' participation in the dominant agencies' undertakings, Uganda's CRRF seems to offer the potential for change. In addition to plans for all camps to have RWCs, the CRRF stresses the establishment of "a Refugee Engagement Forum (REF)." Based on the RWC system, the REF seeks to "facilitate meaningful participation in decisions affecting [refugees] from the national level"; after a call, two refugee representatives – one woman and one man – were selected (Government of Uganda 2018, 22).

Whereas this actually formalizes refugees as political members alongside government and aid organizations in Uganda's CRRF Steering Group, which meets on a quarterly basis (Government of Uganda 2021, 19), questions remain. On the one hand, the extent to which these two representatives are involved in policy- and decision making, whether their perspectives are truly considered by government authorities and aid organizations in the debates, and thus how they are not only influenced by, but also actively shape, their structural environment, cannot be spoken to based on the data available. On the other hand, the forum was already established in 2018, and thus must have been developed months before, but none of our interlocutors addressed, or even mentioned, the REF or the CRRF Steering Group on their own during our research in Uganda or in subsequent

conversations. It was only when we brought it up and asked about it that some contacts addressed it, expressing a sense of hope, albeit guarded, for change.

However, structural change in the political arena takes time, and we remain cautiously optimistic that these formalized structures of refugees' political representation in a decision-making body will lead to both greater acknowledgment of refugees as autonomous actors and improvements in asylum conditions in the country. Our optimism is also bolstered by the increasing attention to formalized refugee-led organizations in Uganda's and the world's political spheres, and by refugees' meaningful participation slowly turning into a global norm, as Milner, Alio, and Gardi (2022) show. How far this will go in the future remains to be seen.

4

"We Come Up with Solutions"

(In)Visibility of Refugees' Formalized Self-Organization in Uganda's Refugee Regime

"When a member of the community gets a problem, we call each other, we sit down, and we come up with a solution for this problem."[1] This statement by a member of a non-profit savings group in Kyaka II reflects, in essence, what many interlocutors described to us – namely, the power of community and the importance of the collective actions and support that refugees self-organize, mobilize, provide, and use. Hence, depending on the issues faced locally, individuals come together and develop solutions that are suitable to themselves and to resolving core issues that arise – or, alternatively, that have long prevailed. They essentially practise agency.

The roles played by formalized self-organizations in displaced people's lives and livelihoods in exile has received increasing attention in the literature pertaining to cases from all over the world (for broader discussions, see Griffiths et al. 2005; Gonzalez Benson 2017; Pincock et al. 2020). Studies address, among many other things, self-organized educational programs, savings groups, and mutual material and immaterial support such as peer counselling (e.g., Piacentini 2015; Brown 2018; Edström et al. 2016; Edström and Dolan 2018; Gonzalez Benson 2020b; Richlen 2022b). These diverse activities not only serve to offer support for displaced people; some studies reflect that such support also runs parallel to, is intertwined with, or even contests the humanitarian systems (e.g., Griffiths et al. 2005; McConnachie 2014; Mayblin and James 2019; Pincock et al. 2020; Kaga 2021; Mencutek 2021; Gonzalez Benson 2022; Nungsari and Chuah 2022; Diab et al. 2024)

1 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

We seek to contribute to this body of research to better understand the roles of refugees' formalized self-organizations in Uganda's refugee regime. Building and drawing on their networks and expertise, individuals and their self-organizations frequently represent the first responders in times of emergency as well as the long-term sources of support in people's everyday lives in Kampala and Kyaka II. Through their mutual assistance, it is primarily their self-organizations that close both the immediate and enduring gaps in care that remain in and partly arise from Uganda's refugee regime. While this is true of both informal and formalized self-organizations, the latter set the strategic objective of providing support in the community. Their efforts extend beyond one single area, addressing social, economic, political, legal, security, cultural, religious, and other endeavours in various ways – as required in the city and the camp. Their self-organized actions are not just an expression of reactive problem solving but also include individuals combining their efforts to proactively initiate and contribute to change.

Their institutionalization of care over time suggests that refugees' formalized self-organizations contribute to Uganda's refugee regime, but are they accepted as actors in this regime? What is the experience of individuals in formalized self-organizations in Kampala and Kyaka II? Which areas do they strategically contribute to in their work, and how do they self-organize their internal structures? Moreover, in what ways are they linked to the regime, what forms of co-operation but also challenges arise, and how are they perceived and treated by government authorities and aid organizations? These questions guide this chapter, as essentially revolving around the roles of formalized self-organizations in Uganda's refugee regime. Based on our analysis of the political objectives, legal regulations, and humanitarian measures along with refugees' challenges in chapters 3, it is evident that groups, while playing a significant role in the aid apparatus, are nonetheless instrumentalized as humanitarian tools; they are stuck in the hierarchical, patriarchal, and restrictive system that ultimately leaves individuals in the position of aid recipients and imposes the collectivization of refugees to serve humanitarian purposes. In contrast, we now focus on the formalized self-organizations that refugees initiate, establish, lead, and maintain independently, thus not resulting from policy – although collaboration can arise, including with government and aid organizations.

To analyze how refugees' formalized self-organizations function and what role they have in Uganda's refugee regime, we continue to apply relational agency following Emirbayer and Mische (1998). This approach enables us to examine the nuances of these self-organizations and pay careful attention to individuals' endeavours as part of or for collectives. They therefore exercise agency not as isolated actors but as members of collectives shaped by personal and shared experiences and aspirations. This approach facilitates our analysis of how people's self-organizations reflect routinized practices that are inherently connected to individual agency influencing the social and political surroundings. Through their self-organized collectives, individuals not only cope with difficulties but also create their own routinized (inter)actions through which they contest, subvert, handle, or otherwise influence the limiting humanitarian, political, and legal structures. Examining formalized self-organizations through a relational agency lens allows us to understand individuals' actions as both reactive – motivated by immediate needs for self-support and self-protection – and proactive – seeking to improve living conditions and livelihoods and (re)shaping the restrictive regime.

To this end, we explore the long-standing work and expertise, funding, forms of collaboration, leadership issues, as well as political attention given to refugees' formalized self-organizations. We argue that they engage in an ongoing effort in the community and build expertise, despite having insufficient funding for their endeavours – which not only affects the work they can do but also gives rise a tradition of volunteerism. In order to enhance their impact and improve such difficult conditions, refugee-led organizations build partnerships with each other, establish broader networks, and seek to collaborate with government and humanitarian agencies (also internationally). Yet, in light of the limited funding, competition and tensions can arise. This depends not least on these organizations' protagonists, how they practise leadership, and what exact aims they pursue. Leaders of self-organizations often reproduce humanitarian language as a strategy to prove how they contribute to political objectives and thus claim to be integrated in decision-making processes. Despite that, the analysis shows that their support is only partly intertwined with and mainly runs parallel to or even contests Uganda's refugee regime. Hence, we argue in closing that the complex support that refugees' self-organizations offer is highly relevant and visible in communities, but that their work remains largely overlooked – if not completely invisible – within Uganda's refugee regime.

That the work of refugees' self-organizations is both vital and wide-ranging was evident in the many such entities that we learned about in Uganda. Refugee Entrepreneurship Association Limited (REAL), one of the very few women-only formalized self-organizations in Uganda, is a prominent example here. We are very grateful to Noella Kabale for allowing us to include her reflection on REAL's background, evolution, and strategic plans here. REAL's process of gestation shows how lived experiences of displacement and the power of mutual support in collectives provide the most-needed support, as well as how this work grows over time in combining social, security, economic, and advocacy endeavours.

REFLECTIONS ON REFUGEE ENTREPRENEURSHIP ASSOCIATION LIMITED (REAL)

Noella Kabale

My name is Noella Kabala and I am the Executive Director of the Refugee Entrepreneurship Association Limited (REAL) in Kampala, Uganda. REAL is a refugee women-led organization founded in 2017. In the beginning, REAL concentrated on advocacy for urban refugees and added protection and livelihood activities over time.

Our work directly responds to the challenges of refugee women and youth. About 1.5 million refugees are in Uganda and the protracted situation has created barriers for livelihoods, protection and education for refugees especially women and youth. Also host communities remain poorly resourced and compete with refugees for scarce local resources, for example employment and income, education, protection, energy resources and water among others. The situation of refugee women and youth is particularly intense. Many are traumatized from the violence during the conflicts but also arising from their forced displacement, face psychological stress and emotional challenges like feelings of hopelessness and anxiety. They also face protection risks and sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), discrimination and abuse, limited opportunities for work and income generation, limited opportunities for education, health, water and sanitation challenges as well as lack of access to clean and affordable energy. Moreover, many women in the settlements rely on aid agencies and lack saleable skills to generate their own income. High costs of documentation for business and education further complicates the situation.

I know how difficult these conditions are because I have lived them. After arriving in Uganda, I first lived in a settlement and then I shifted to Kampala. I faced many challenges and witness that many people are suffering, and in particular women. As I wanted to support improvements, I started REAL.

Inspired by the desire of refugees to meet their own needs and not be dependent on aid agencies, REAL seeks to empower marginalized refugees and host community women and youth with knowledge and skills for inclusive socio-economic transformation, dignified living and self-reliance. To pursue this, we have broadened the activities of REAL since its founding in 2017 to meet the needs of refugee women and youth.

When REAL started to work with urban refugees, advocacy was most important but soon also provided vocational and entrepreneurship training and mentorship in Rubaga Division, Kampala. In 2019, we expanded the work to Kawempe and Makindye Divisions with more activities in livelihoods and protection such as awareness creation on SGBV, community dialogue among others. When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, many problems arose. It was necessary to strengthen REAL's response and revise the REAL strategy. Our programmes extended to Central Division with business clinics and village savings and loan associations (VSLA) to respond to the livelihoods challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic for refugee women and youth. REAL also increased the involvement in capacity-building and research. Since 2022, REAL acquires a bigger office and space in Rubaga South. We consolidated livelihoods, protection, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), inclusive education and capacity-building and research programmes taking shape.

For the upcoming years, REAL's strategic three-year plan (2023–2025) has four core programmes:

1 Livelihoods through vocational skills training in tailoring, arts & crafts and catering; urban farming and food security; business skills and entrepreneurship training; incubation hub, income generating activities (IGAs) and emergency basic needs support.
2 MHPSS through awareness raising, information-giving, counselling support, sports, referrals, advocacy among others.
3 Education through language training for adults and advocacy.

4 Capacity-building, research and documentation in collaboration with research institutions, universities, researchers and agencies through: refugee women- and youth-led knowledge search and verification, generation of measurable and testable data, knowledge accumulation and information-sharing.

The strategy is guided by the needs of marginalized refugees and host community women and youth, REAL's experiences, the current refugee context among others. REAL employed a participatory methodology by involving REAL leadership, staff, volunteers, beneficiaries and key partners (refugees and host community) to clarify and come up with a better understanding of REAL's mission, vision, strategic goals and objectives leading to the REAL strategic plan 2023–2025.

REAL's work is guided by our core values:

- Beneficiary-centred: A razor-sharp focus on our beneficiaries is essential for our success
- Hospitality: A feeling of welcome is the hallmark of our service to everyone
- Dignity: We treat the people we serve with compassion, respect and dignity
- Hope: We encourage and inspire hope in the people we serve
- Participation: We promote active participation and inclusion in decision-making processes with relevant stakeholders
- Transparency: We commit to openness in our interactions and motives
- Accountability: We are responsible for our actions
- Professionalism: We place professionalism at the heart of our actions on behalf of the people we serve, partners and team members
- Leadership: We are committed to empowering and inspiring refugee women and youth entrepreneurs
- Integrity: To be honest and respectful to al

Finally, for our work, REAL stakeholders are the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Department for Refugees; UNHCR and partner agencies; refugee- and host community–led organizations, beneficiaries (refugees and host community), refugee and host community leaders, local authorities, local institutions (churches, schools, police, local councillors, hospitals among others), and donors.

Despite our efforts and achievements to support refugee women and youth through protection, livelihoods, education, advocacy and many other areas, REAL continues to be confronted with challenges. The major challenge is the limited funding opportunities. To provide the activities we have done in the past and strategically plan to continue to focus on in the future requires having sufficient resources. However, gaining access to funding opportunities as well as maintaining partnerships with donors is difficult and time-intensive. Moreover, also our work in advocacy to defend the rights of refugee women and youth through participation, advising, networking, lobbying and media campaigns is associated with the risk of losing funding or our reputation. While there is a growing recognition to the importance of refugee-led organizations in humanitarian responses, funding is insufficient – which complicates the work of REAL.

Generously contributed on 9 April 2023

LONG-STANDING WORK AND EXPERTISE OF REFUGEES' FORMALIZED SELF-ORGANIZATIONS

With its objective of supporting other displaced women, and by that being challenged by actors of the refugee regime but also seeking partnership with other organizations, REAL is certainly not alone. Our research with refugees' formalized self-organizations shows that many pursue clear strategic objectives and place collective support at the heart of their operations. To that end, they often concentrate their entire work or certain endeavours on specific social groups – such as people from certain countries, or women, children, and youth, or LGBTQ+ people.

The strategic approach adopted is evident in the way interlocutors described their chosen areas of focus. For example, the Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) strives to empower displaced people with employable skills, sports, language classes, and vocational trainings, thereby also promoting gender equality; the Bondeko Refugee Livelihoods Centre (Bondeko Centre) was established with the aim of helping new refugees arriving in Kampala facing difficulties finding accommodation and going through the process of

registering as asylum-seekers and strongly broadened the perspective on integration, livelihoods, education, counselling, among other things; Hope for Children and Women Victims of Violence (HOCW) seeks to empower displaced women with the necessary skills to take care for themselves and prevent gender-based violence against women; Kyaka Interpreters, Translators Association for Development (KITAD) offers translation services, seeks to sensitize communities, and disseminate information about rights to newly arriving and current refugees alike, in addition to providing vocational training to improve economic opportunities; the Refugee Welfare Foundation (RWF) integrates livelihood activities with mental health and psychosocial support services to eradicate dependence syndrome among refugees and promote well-being by fostering self-reliance, resilience, and social cohesion within displaced communities; the Urban Refugee Rights Program (URRP) sets out to teach refugees about their rights; Restoration and Hope for Refugees (REHORE) aims to provide refugees with vocational training in order to maximize their employability; an LGBTQ+ refugee-led organization (anonymized) seeks to protect and support queer refugees and advocates for their rights and well-being;[2] the Association de femmes Réfugiées en Afrique (ASOFRA) seeks to protect, support, and promote displaced women through socio-psychological and economic measures; and the Somali Youth Development Project provides direction to newly arriving youth, empowering them through knowledge and health education, and carries out awareness campaigns related to HIV/AIDS as well as female genital mutilation.[3] These are just some examples of the diverse and multifaceted initiatives that refugees self-organize, indicating a wide range of approaches and priorities that are impossible to cover completely.

Fields of Practices and Expertise

These insights already indicate the wide range of formalized support areas that refugees' self-organizations cover. They include systematically helping during arrival and integration; tackling gender-based

2 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

3 This information is based on dialogues. To preserve anonymity, we do not reference – or provide references for information directly relating to – the individual organizations in our citations throughout (unless otherwise stated).

violence and promoting gender equality; finding and arranging accommodation; providing legal advice on asylum or residence procedures; advising on social issues such as access to public services like education and medical care; organizing language courses; providing skills and vocational training as well as further education; offering self-help groups and psychosocial counselling; maintaining savings groups and loan schemes; delivering material aid, such as clothing; making available social meeting places; raising awareness about issues in the community; and, especially, advocacy for the rights of refugees locally, nationally, and globally.

These diverse formalized services are used widely by refugees and partly also Ugandans, creating significant visibility for the respective collective actions refugees lead, mobilize, maintain, and offer. They rarely exist for the short term, instead often growing over time – thereby strengthening their structures and mechanisms as well as developing distinct fields of expertise. For example, the Tusongane Cultural and Dance Group was originally founded in 1996 in Kyaka II and re-established in 2006; the Bondeko Centre was founded in 1997; People for Peace and Defense for Rights (PPDR) in 2002; YARID in 2007; the HOCW in 2008; URRP in 2011; REHORE in 2012; and Pleaders of Children and Elderly People at Risk (PEPA) in 2007.[4] Hence, by the time we met, several of the self-organizations had been in existence for more than a decade already.

Their expertise evolves over time, especially as a result of people's direct lived experiences of displacement, encampment, legal structures, and the aid apparatus. Thus, because the members of refugee-led organizations had to flee and know what such a choice means for them, their families, and communities, they are inherently familiar with the everyday conditions and challenges that other displaced people (will) face. Overcoming and improving these core issues frequently represents the leading motivation for individuals to self-organize – namely, by founding and engaging in collectives to enhance their possibilities and impact. Due to their expertise, self-organizations can and do provide the very assistance that individuals are the most in need of in specific contexts.

The long-term processes reflect routinized practices from the perspective of relational agency. Giddens (1991) posits that the process of routinization compels individuals to establish consistent practices,

4 Anonymous.

which in turn brings order and stability to their relationships. This tendency is particularly crucial in navigating the challenging conditions faced by those seeking asylum in Uganda. Routines thus play a pivotal role in the functioning of formalized self-organizations, enabling them to provide sustained support over the long term. Rather than being merely dictated by external circumstances or random events, these routines emerge from "a process of selection from practical repertoires of habitual activity" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980). This dynamic allows self-organizations to not only address pressing needs as they arise but also to cultivate consistent operational methods that enhance their adaptability and effectiveness over time. By fostering such routines, these organizations build trust and reliability within the communities they serve, solidifying their status as essential actors in the realms of refugee protection and the wider humanitarian landscape.

Refugees' formalized self-organizations therefore offer opportunities to provide and receive collective and mutual support, and thus for relative independence from the humanitarian and state structures that often complicate people's lives. The self-organizations, ipso facto, support others to not only become self-reliant but to actually build self-sufficient, independent, and resilient lives. However, it is important to acknowledge that the uncertain legal conditions and restrictive aid apparatus remain in place; as such, people do not know how long they might be able to stay in Uganda, when governmental authorities might decide to repatriate them, or how aid will be formally provided in the future. In consequence, they often trust self-organized collectives and their services more than government authorities and aid organizations. This is the case not least because members of the former can empathize more with their plight having, as noted, lived through such circumstances themselves.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Mirror for the Important Work of Self-Organizations

The COVID-19 pandemic–induced changes and challenges that Noella Kabale addresses above with regard to REAL's work would also impact other self-organizations. This was by no means the case only in Uganda; indeed, the continued importance of self-organized assistance would become obvious all over the world during the pandemic. A number of studies have reflected on the vital importance of self-organized support structures by and for people with lived experience

of displacement in the context of the pandemic (e.g., Alio et al. 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Refiloe Ogude and Chekero 2020; Boru 2020; McSweeney et al. 2020; Betts et al. 2021; Segadlo et al. 2021a, 2021b; Chandiga Justine 2021). As Alio and colleagues highlight, "[r]efugee leaders and refugee-led organisations have mobilised to provide support and essential information in response to the pandemic within their regions. In countries around the world, refugees are providing information and training, food distribution, legal support, online mental health support, and transportation for those in need of medical care, and are filling critical gaps in basic services including in health, education and protection" (2020, 76–7).

In Uganda, the effects of the pandemic were also harsh: "Poverty, rates for COVID treatment are high, and domestic violence on [the] increase."[5] Moreover, "refugees … facing eviction from their houses for those staying in urban settings, food security (many are now starving), and access to medical treatment"[6] were noted as among the prevalent issues here. In responding to the qualitative questionnaire we prepared, participants stressed that it was primarily refugees and their self-organizations who took over and provided much-needed protection and support. The scope of services offered was broad, and ranged from "supporting in the sensitisation on the standard operating procedures [established] in fighting the pandemic"[7] to "compos[ing] songs on the pandemic" to raise awareness and share information.[8] Youth-led organizations also had an important role to play here – namely, "[to] spread the messages that [contain] the information to protect [against] the coronavirus pandemic."[9] Material support was further highlighted, in "helping each other with food, and some even had to translate the messages of the Ministry of Health."[10]

This was vital not least because the staff from the aid organizations were said to have left – particularly from Uganda's camps – due to the government's imposed lockdown measures. It was explained that "[m]any refugee partners and agencies left the settlements when the pandemic broke out. Refugees were left in the hand[s] of local government, which was overstretched [on] delivery services."[11] Another

5 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 25 January 2021.
6 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 26 January 2021.
7 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 25 January 2021.
8 Response by a woman to a qualitative questionnaire, 28 January 2021.
9 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 18 January 2021.
10 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 25 January 2021.
11 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 3 February 2021.

man even recounted that "[r]efugee-led initiatives took over in the settlements, volunteering to educate the refugees on the pandemic when INGOs [international NGOs] left the settlements."[12] As humanitarian agencies had to withdraw, they also left the responsibility for providing support with refugees' self-organizations.

This troublesome reality was strongly criticized by one representative of a formalized self-organization:

> The humanitarian actors who are supposed to intervene in emergency situation[s], they were really distancing themselves from us for the fear of contracting the virus. But you've been calling yourself a humanitarian? We said, "No, for me, I'll be there to support these people." You see, COVID has built a barrier between the humanitarian actors with the person of concern. For us, we took a risk. We took a lot of risk. We went on and we said, "These are our people. They speak the same language as us. We understand each other. We have to support them." You get it? I know the support [provided by] our intervention as refugee-led organizations started before COVID. Before all these sort[s] of atrocities. We started supporting our people. But when COVID came, [it] brought a mirror. That mirror shows that people within the community, at the community level, at the grassroots level, are the actual potential. These are [the] actors that are on the front line of the response. We need to recognize them. Can I say that the agencies are recognizing us? I don't think so.[13]

In line with this view, one man further highlighted that "[m]any refugee-led organizations were much involved in COVID response. We have seen many helping each other with food and some even had to translate the messages of the ministry of health."[14] Others highlighted that "[r]efugee-led initiatives took over in the settlements, volunteering to educate the refugees on the pandemic when INGOs left the settlements,"[15] and that "[t]hey are supporting in the sensitization on the standard operating procedures set in fighting the pandemic."[16]

12 Response by a man to a qualitative questionnaire, 3 February 2021.
13 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.
14 Response to a qualitative questionnaire by a man, 25 January 2021.
15 Response to a qualitative questionnaire by a man, 3 February 2021.
16 Response to a qualitative questionnaire by a woman, 25 January 2021.

FUNDING, CO-OPERATION, LEADERSHIP, AND COMPETITION OF REFUGEES' FORMALIZED SELF-ORGANIZATIONS

The wide-ranging formalized support structures are not limited to the pandemic-related responses; indeed, formalized self-organizations have been mobilizing diverse projects both before and after the onset of the pandemic. This work requires resources, and especially financial resources, but access to funding represents the leading issue they must deal with. In light of that, their strategic aims and commitment to finding ways to collaborate with the agencies and strengthen partnerships with and networks among self-organizations are particularly crucial. However, competition can also arise due to the leadership structures and personalities of those in charge of self-organizations.

Lack of Funding, Volunteerism, and Fees in Self-Organizations

Whether during emergencies such as the pandemic or in more stable times, funding is central for refugees' formalized self-organizations to carry out the support measures they set out to provide. While some are able to acquire international funding (thus not necessarily from aid organizations in Uganda), many others exist and operate without additional external support – operating instead on the basis of membership fees and providing support through volunteers. This situation is highly challenging, and funding constraints represent the single biggest problem that all representatives of refugees' self-organizations stressed in conversation. The effects that arise therefrom include insufficient payment of workers, a tradition of volunteerism, and being obliged to ask for payment from those who want to access their services but are barely able to afford to do so, and leaders having to spend their own money.

INSUFFICIENT FUNDING

Funding constraints affect all regular support offers, as interlocutors explained. However, the larger self-organizations become and the more formalized projects they carry out, the greater their need for funding. This is rooted in the repetition of projects (e.g., vocational training or food assistance), the staff necessary to implement them, the infrastructure such as offices to coordinate activities and provide services,

the internal structures required to manage services, memberships and members' fees, the acquisition of materials, the maintenance of facilities, the administrative expenses – to name some regularly arising costs. In addition, they must develop internal administrative structures to apply for, receive, and manage external funding. These administrative systems are important, as donors frequently request project monitoring, evaluation, and accountability reports as a part of funding arrangements. Moreover, to be able to apply for and receive funding in the first place, self-organizations need formal recognition from Uganda's political authorities. Thus, they have to register as a group, a CBO, an NGO, and similar in stating their non-profit purpose.

Such registration is frequently said to be a highly difficult – and expensive – process, however. Particularly in Kyaka II, registration depends on social relations since it requires the camp authorities' approval – especially to preclude groups forming with political objectives, a realm of activity in which refugees are not allowed to engage in Uganda. One interlocutor described how his appeal was rejected, preventing him from applying for funds later on.[17] This demonstrates that the decision to register self-organizations in Uganda is not solely based on internal discussions among leaders and representatives about their desire to formalize their self-organizations; it also involves individuals' collective efforts to navigate, manage, and potentially bypass authorities in order to achieve their set objectives. These criteria, however, inform people's practices beyond immediate interactions with the government authorities and aid organizations since the knowledge about them and their regulations is incorporated into the "practical evaluation" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1001) and thus into groups' expectations of their prospects for support. Interlocuters, particularly in Kyaka II, therefore explained that they considered the regulations before applying for registration or support.

While being able to access funding was a key reason for registering, funding from Uganda's aid system was extremely rare at the time of research, and if it occurred, it caused distinct levels of dependency that frequently translated into self-organizations having to adjust their projects to align with the core objectives of those in power. This resonates with the way groups are misused and partly even exploited as humanitarian tools. To avoid such challenges, leaders and representatives also pursue international funding, and some are able to

17 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.

access resources channelled to them in the camp or Kampala from outside Uganda, by, for instance, international aid organizations based elsewhere,[18] private sponsors,[19] initiatives founded by resettled refugees,[20] or international religious groups.[21] However, this is also a difficult undertaking; it takes time to acquire knowledge about such funding possibilities in the first place, to then build and maintain the necessary connections with these funding institutions, to learn about applying for grants, writing proposals, and managing them, and repeating the process of compiling grant applications. But it also demonstrates the broad "repertoire" existing for self-organizations and their ability to "maneuver" these – as framed in the concept of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980). While one may argue that pursuing funding is time well spent because it enables self-organizations to offer more support, it simultaneously diverts time away from directly interacting with the community.

This reality was widely criticized by interlocutors during our research in 2016 and 2017, and it continues to be a core constraint for those with whom we have since kept in touch. In fact, only a few leaders and representatives of self-organizations reported being able to establish transnational networks with institutions outside Uganda and to repeatedly access funding – albeit while also not knowing how long this funding would last.[22] Some interlocutors criticized how funding opportunities are not shared among self-organizations, and that they must ensure their own standing and financial security[23] – an issue we explore in greater detail below concerning competition. One representative complained, furthermore, about who exactly such funding is funnelled to: "These are big, big brands that support the refugee response. And this money is meant to support refugees. But what do

18 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.
19 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.
20 Discussion with four men, 11 July 2017, Kyaka II.
21 Discussion with six men, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.
22 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.
23 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.

we see when money comes? It goes to the international organizations alone, not even a single refugee-led organization will benefit from it."[24] Even gaining recognition, let alone respect, as relevant actors in the humanitarian system is thus a key issue here, yet one standing in stark contrast to the perspectives of refugees themselves as they recognize the great relevance of self-organizations and regularly access their support offers.

These difficulties ultimately translate into struggles to realize the support that self-organizations set out to provide and to sustain the livelihoods of the individuals involved herein. Some self-organizations collect membership fees, which they use to implement projects such as food assistance, language classes, business or vocational training, or other services. However, these fees are barely enough to facilitate their endeavours or to satisfy the needs of recipients – let alone for providers to earn a salary.[25] Even those self-organizations that had managed to acquire external funding frequently noted that the amounts received were not sufficient; external funds were short-term in nature and created constant additional work to acquire and administer them and lobby for further backing. Limitations can also be imposed insofar as some funds are earmarked for specific areas.[26] Thus, many interlocutors who ran or actively engaged in such collectives continuously worried about how they could maintain self-organizations and their services. Self-organizing thus becomes inherently intertwined with bureaucratic concerns.

Unstable Working Conditions, a Tradition of Volunteerism, and Other Effects of Insufficient Funding

Besides their work in and for self-organizations, several leaders and active supporters – one may call them staff, but few actually have contracts – are obliged to pursue day-to-day jobs by running small businesses, hawking, via savings groups, or other occasional jobs to earn an income and survive due to these challenging circumstances. Many leaders stated explicitly that their own work and that of supporters was not paid, and thus the self-organizations primarily

24 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.
25 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.
26 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 July 2017, Kyaka II.

functioned through volunteers.[27] This did not go unnoticed by those accessing their offers; one young man rued how "people here volunteer. I wonder how they manage."[28] They do this despite sometimes paying a high price personally for their commitment. For example, one man who on a voluntary basis managed the savings accounts of several groups in the camp described feeling threatened because people were suspicious of him and thus reluctant to trust him with their money. One can imagine that the reasons for such suspicion relate to the fact that the man lacked his own financial resources and thus might be assumed to represent a risk in the eyes of those potentially entrusting their savings to him. Yet, from his perspective, the man, despite receiving no payment for his labour, had assumed the considerable responsibility of managing these groups' savings accounts, even when doing so opened him to the unjustified suspicions of those with whom he was dealing.[29]

Such difficult working conditions apply to different areas of endeavour – whether economically oriented vocational training or socially oriented psychosocial counselling, for example. This is exhausting for the individuals involved, can place a heavy burden on them, and reveals the tension between solidarity and exploitation in refugees' self-organizations. These stark challenges do not only occur in Uganda either. In her research about refugee community organizations of people from Darfur resident in Israel, Richlen explores their community centres and reflects that "[a]ll are managed by committees of unpaid 'staff' who are assigned different tasks (e.g. financial, public relations, event coordination)" (2022a, 1261). Gonzalez Benson (2020a) also discusses the diverse tasks of volunteers in her study of refugee community organizations in Bhutanese communities in the United States, including leadership roles, needs assessments, English classes, and providing everyday assistance. While, by contrast, Kara and colleagues find that refugee-led organizations in East African countries "provide better paid opportunities for volunteers or staff" (2022, 3), such conditions are unfortunately not widely observed.

27 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, discussion, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.

28 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.

29 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.

Instead, the prevalence of unpaid or insufficiently paid staff and volunteerism remains a significant challenge that refugees experience in self-organizations worldwide (e.g., Bloch 2002; Griffiths et al. 2005; Lacroix et al. 2015; Brown 2018; Sunata and Tosun 2018; Mayblin and James 2019; Gonzalez Benson et al. 2022).

As a result of funding gaps, uncertainties, and lack of salaries, representatives of self-organizations in Uganda mentioned in dialogues that they experience difficulties in finding "qualified staff"[30] – or, in fact, qualified volunteers – leading to concerns about the quality of their offered services. Vocational training or language classes as well as social projects such as food delivery were cited here. Every now and then, the leaders had to cut projects and services because they could not afford to keep them up or did not have the workers necessary to maintain them.[31] Moreover, some interlocutors noted that funds were so low that they were experiencing a decline in "membership commitment,"[32] had to give up office space and provide services in a "home environment,"[33] or even that their organizations rarely functioned properly. This resonates with the words of one person to whom we spoke: "We don't have enough funds to actively run the organization."[34] In effect, some leaders and representatives reach the point where they have to take the decision to put a stop to their work; one interlocutor estimated that "[m]ost of the refugee-led organizations are 'briefcase' organizations because they lack funds to sustain themselves."[35] That this is indeed regularly the case is evident from interlocutors repeatedly sharing examples of former organizations that have since dissolved.

Whether in the form of membership dues or of fees for specific support, taking money from those accessing services is another key issue. Some interlocutors criticized this approach, explicitly noting the widespread livelihood constraints and resulting poverty many experience.

30 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala. See also, man from DR Congo, dialogue, 2 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kampala.
31 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 December 2016, Kampala.
32 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 December 2016, Kampala.
33 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 December 2016, Kampala.
34 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala.
35 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.

As one man lamented, "[s]upporting them [self-organizations] with money when there is no peaceful place where we can do business – for me I see that it is not a solution."[36] In line with that, many interlocutors – and especially women – reflected how difficult it was for them to pay these fees, despite knowing they could benefit from the support and spaces of socializing and belonging that such formalized self-organizations offer in Kampala and Kyaka II.[37] Among them was one woman who had been living in Kampala since 2003; she described the violence she and her family had faced in DR Congo but also the discrimination she was now exposed to in Kampala. Their lives were complicated by limited livelihoods and continuous anxiety about the future. She and her husband had tried to access skills training and join support groups offered by self-organizations but said they had failed. The fees involved were too much to bear: "I fear the pressure of keeping [up] the required money within the groups."[38]

These problems were highly gendered and stemmed from difficulties in being able to sustain livelihoods and generate sufficient income. Although many interlocutors cited these challenges regardless of gender, women often encountered additional burdens of even lower-paid work and greater hardships during occasional employment. The inability of some to use services resulted from not only financial issues but also their family situations. Some women did not have access to daycare opportunities for their children and thus could not spend several hours away in taking up self-organizations' offers.[39] If they ran households alone as single mothers, they were furthermore burdened with covering school fees and other expenses – which fundamentally limited their ability to pay the aforementioned service costs. Moreover, LGBTQ+ refugees[40] frequently encounter heightened challenges due to widespread discrimination. For many, tasks such as travelling to

36 Man from Rwanda, dialogue, 22 June 2017, Kampala.
37 E.g., discussion with five women from DR Congo, 9 December 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 12 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
38 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 31 January 2017, Kampala.
39 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with five women from DR Congo, 9 December 2016, Kampala.
40 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

access self-organizations support offers, seeking and maintaining income-generating opportunities to cover their daily expense as well as support offers, and ensuring personal safety amid discriminatory environments become exceedingly difficult.[41]

Considering the challenges that leaders, staff, and members regularly experience, one may wonder how they manage to maintain their engagement in self-organizations – and why they take on such burdens if acute tensions and problems continue to feature every step of the way. On the one hand, many stressed their hope and intrinsic aim to contribute to the community and to help improve people's circumstances. Leaders, representatives, and active supporters often use their own resources here,[42] and one leader explained how "[w]e don't receive any payment but we are inspired by the impact in the community, and we are pleased to see the outcome."[43] Similarly, one man noted, "I think the leaders fund everything from their [own] pockets."[44] On the other hand, it is important to consider the standing that some of the leaders and representatives of self-organizations come to assume in the community. The opportunity to enjoy powerful positions and strong repute is not to be underestimated as a driver here.[45]

Collaboration, Networks, but Also Competition Among Self-Organizations

Especially because of the funding constraints, formalized self-organizations enter into strategic collaboration and partnerships to enhance the impact of their work. In recent years, such partnerships have evolved into formalized networks seeking to increase the visibility and work of self-organizations. Yet, processes aimed at building and maintaining collaboration are not without their obstacles, and various forms of tension and competition do arise.

41 Anonymous.
42 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 July 2017.
43 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.
44 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kampala.
45 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; man from Rwanda, dialogue, 22 June 2017, Kampala.

CO-OPERATION AND NETWORKING BETWEEN SELF-ORGANIZATIONS

Interlocutors recurrently highlighted their collaboration with other self-organizations.[46] To share just two out of many possible examples at the time of research, HOCW explicitly described currently being in partnership with Hope for Refugees in Action (HRA), YARID, and PPDR; KITAD, meanwhile, went into strategic co-operation with COBURWAS International Youth Organization to Transform Africa (CIYOTA) in offering training.[47] In fact, in comparison, many more leaders and representatives mentioned collaboration with other self-organizations than with government authorities and/or aid organizations.

Partnerships among formalized self-organizations do not primarily serve to increase political standing, reputation, and visibility, but are integral to their everyday operations. These collaborations leverage collective efforts and resources to address the complex needs of communities as well as to navigate the myriad constraints self-organizations are confronted with. For instance, self-organizations exchange vital information, jointly advocate for refugees' rights, needs, and interests to raise public awareness, refer displaced people to other self-organizations providing needed services, collaborate on programs to maximize resource efficiency, and co-develop strategies for fundraising to increase the likelihood of success. Such collaborations enhance their impact, extend their reach within communities, and enable them to undertake more comprehensive actions and proceed in a cost-effective way, which is crucial in light of the meagre funding available.

Partnerships also go beyond the collaboration between specific refugee-led organizations and occur instead in broader, more structured ways over time. Hence, networks of refugee-led organizations have emerged. We came across the so-called Uganda Network for Refugees Services Providers' Organizations (UNRSPO), founded in Kampala already in 2009, but not much information could be elicited about the objectives and scope of its networking activities. One interlocutor, meanwhile, spoke about a later initiative: "In 2012, we tried forming Refugee Grassroots Network, called RGN, to bring all refugee organizations together. At that time, most organizations had no funds. Even worse, we realized there was a lot of duplication of services by a number

46 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 1 December 2016, Kampala.

47 Anonymous.

of organizations. Also, UNHCR complained of the duplication among organizations … We mapped out a total of sixty-four refugee organizations, but offices seemed closed due to lack of funds for activities."[48]

RGN was short-lived due to insufficient support and commitment. However, the spirit of collaboration persists to this day, which the Refugee Led Organisation Network Uganda (RELON Uganda) most prominently reflects (see also Pincock et al. 2020, 39–42). Based in Kampala, RELON Uganda was established by four refugee-led organizations (YARID, HOCW, HRA, and CIYOTA) in May 2016, and had grown to constitute a network of more than fifty refugee-led organizations by 2023.[49] Already at its launch phase when we carried out much of the research, interlocutors highlighted the primary objective in RELON Uganda's work as strengthening the visibility of refugees' self-organizations in general, and, further, helping them come together and co-operate.[50] This primary aim has persisted over time, becoming further refined and specified: "RELON Uganda was formed to build capacity of RLOs by sharing of experiences, knowledge, data and opportunities with Refugee led organizations, advocate and lobby on behalf of Refugee led organizations, contribute to policy making affecting refugees, fundraise and mobilize resources for supporting refugee work in Uganda."[51]

Such a coming together to increase impact and reach ultimately reveals the *self-organization of self-organizations*, which is currently also evident globally, regionally, and locally. For example, the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) was founded in 2018,[52] and the Africa Refugee-Led Network (ARN) was subsequently established in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2019.[53] Further national networks have emerged in a growing number of countries world3wide, including Uganda's

48 Anonymous.

49 See Refugee-Led Organization Network of Uganda, "About Us," https://relonuganda.org/about-3/ (last accessed 12 August 2023).

50 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 June 2017, Kyaka II.

51 See Refugee-Led Organization Network of Uganda, "About Us," https://relonuganda.org/about-3/ (last accessed 12 August 2023).

52 See Global Refugee-Led Network, "About Us," https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/about-us (link defunct; last accessed 12 August 2023).

53 See African Refugee-Led Network, "ARN History," https://arn-network.org/index.php/arn-history/ (last accessed 26 August 2025).

neighbour Kenya with the founding there of Refugee-Led Organization Network of Kenya.[54]

This form of self-organization of self-organizations additionally arose in Kyaka II. As Isreal Katembo explains in his reflections (see chapter 6), the Kyaka II Refugee-Led Organisations Network (KRLON) was established by fifteen refugee-led and community-based organizations in February 2022. One year later, KRLON already counted 98 such organizations as members in addition to 426 groups. KRLON aims "[t]o strengthen coordination, act as a collective voice for policy influence, promote partnerships and build the capacity of local organizations to be effective first and post recovery responders to humanitarian situations in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement."[55] KRLON's work is guided by the principles of transparency, accountability, democracy, and teamwork.

Networks like RELON Uganda and KRLON embody alliances, seek to offer support by reciprocally sharing knowledge and experience, create visibility for the work of member organizations, and increase their members' standing with the government authorities and aid organizations.[56] Moreover, their systematic networking and collective advocacy have the potential to significantly amplify pressure on government authorities and aid organizations to acknowledge the self-organizations' work, impact, and roles, with the result that they are more inclined to co-operate with them. Consequently, these networks are influential platforms for enhancing the support structures of formalized self-organizations as well as potentially shaping policy-making processes.

COMPETITION AND TENSIONS BETWEEN SELF-ORGANIZATIONS

However, competition also arises, and some leaders and representatives see the necessity to safeguard the self-organizations they lead

54 See Refugee-Led Organization Network of Kenya, homepage, https://www.relonkenya.or.ke (last accessed 12 August 2023).

55 See KYAKA2.com, "KRLON," https://www.kyaka2.com/krlon (last accessed 29 April 2023). See also https://twitter.com/KrlonOfficial (last accessed 23 December 2023).

56 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala. See also the explanations on the websites of RELON Uganda and KRLON.

instead of participating in RELON Uganda due to the scarcity of resources and past experiences of inadequate co-operation. Conversation partners criticized that some leaders and representatives sought to dominate the scene, aiming to boost their own visibility and trying to make decisions even if these would also affect self-organizations.[57] One man thus explained that "some organizational leaders came up with one [network organization], they drafted the constitution, financial policies, among other requirements, but [they] also went ahead to register it. After all that, they requested us to join, but even then they were not willing to share the details of what [this would] entail. We couldn't be part of something like that."[58]

Looking at RELON Uganda – and also KRLON – in 2024, their activities involving various refugee-led organizations illustrate progress toward their collective objectives – and it seems that competition has been mitigated.[59] Some of the struggles and instances of competition appear to prevail in the context of RELON Uganda, however. These challenges affect not only those directly involved but also those on the sidelines who aspire to join the network's collective efforts. In our research, especially leaders and representatives of smaller self-organizations and those focusing on specific groups encounter barriers to participation or face outright exclusion. This lack of inclusivity diminishes their visibility and networking opportunities and restricts their access to crucial discussions and information. This fosters distrust and discourages affected leaders and representatives.[60]

Such exclusion and power struggles also arise in bilateral forms, and narratives of competition are as frequent as those of partnerships. Some leaders and representatives clearly noted that they decided not to co-operate with others.[61] While some did not share why this was

57 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.

58 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.

59 See Refugee-Led Organization Network of Uganda, "Services," https://relonuganda.org/services-2/ (last accessed 23 December 2023); https://twitter.com/KrlonOfficial (last accessed 23 December 2023).

60 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 February 2021, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.

61 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 1 December 2016, Kampala.

the case, and instead further addressed the important work of their self-organizations, others did offer explanations. The latter pointed out that, in the past, information was insufficiently shared among the respective leaders, funding opportunities were kept hidden, decisions were made hierarchically about their work and collaboration, and co-operation thus did not take place on an equal footing.[62] For example, one interlocutor remarked, "there is high competition in the field,"[63] and explained how leaders fought for power and influence. This competition was connected not least to the need for them to increase the visibility of their own work in order to have a chance of securing funding for it. As one representative highlighted,

> In terms of accessing funding, it's a big issue. I am part of so many coalitions. And I'm sharing this from my heart. I am part of so many coalitions. I have worked with so many civil society organizations and refugee-led organizations – even those that are meant to advocate for the people. But when money comes, the leaders only think of themselves. It's all about themselves first. Not the community. Not the community. They think of themselves. They do not share. Not the funding, not the information, not the decisions, not the contacts. But we work for the community, no?[64]

Such criticism and competition weigh heavily and can lead to exploitation of some refugee-led organizations. Another representative stressed similarly that "big refugee-led organizations don't work with us. They include our name in their bidding [for funding] and then they reject us and keep the money."[65]

Some studies about refugee-led organizations elsewhere in the world also mention issues related to competition over resources (e.g., Griffiths et al. 2005; MacKenzie et al. 2012), but the problem has thus far not been sufficiently researched and requires further attention. Given the scarcity of resources available and self-organizations' need to build their reputation and create visibility for themselves in order

62 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.
63 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala.
64 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.
65 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 February 2021, Kampala.

to have a chance for external support, competition is plausible. These issues are not limited to self-organizations but indeed resonate with the fierce struggles between humanitarian and development agencies over funding and influence globally also concerning refugee protection and assistance (e.g., Väyrynen 2001; Aldashev and Verdier 2010; Orgad 2013).

Leadership (Struggles) in Self-Organizations

Despite the increase of research on self-organizations, the distinct roles and challenges of representation and leadership – especially individual representatives and leaders – of self-organizations have received comparatively little scholarly attention. Among the studies addressing this area, Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter (2005, 138–9) highlight the importance of leadership skills, expertise, and motivation in refugee community organizations in England. They note that many leaders are university-educated and were professionals in their countries of origin, potentially creating gaps between them and the people they seek to support. Kirsch and colleagues (2023) underscore the pivotal role of leaders in immigrant- and refugee-led community-based ethnic organizations in the US Midwest, acting as connectors and cultural brokers between communities and care services. Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria find that "charismatic leaders make a difference" (2020, 29) in refugee-led organizations in Kenya and Uganda, and reflect that leaders have to manage varying perceptions and expectations from external and internal actors (2020, 113–15). Moreover, Dinbabo and colleagues (2021) examine self-organizing and representation structures of Somali, Congolese, and Ethiopian refugees in South Africa and emphasize prevailing gender issues. Our research with refugees' formalized self-organizations in Kyaka II and Kampala partly corresponds with these results, especially concerning gender imbalances, but also extends beyond them.

WHO ARE LEADERS AND REPRESENTATIVES? DIVERSITY AND A GENDER GAP

Among the formalized self-organizations that we were able interact with, the respective leaders and representatives had diverse backgrounds. While originating and having fled from a diverse array of countries, the majority stemmed from DR Congo, with fewer from Rwanda, Burundi, and Somalia. Many ran small-scale businesses – crucial to not only

sustain their own livelihoods but also support their self-organizations – and were engaged in economic networks. Some had university degrees or were enrolled in study programs at the time of research. Although the age range of leaders and representatives was broad, most fell within the mid-twenties to fifties. Additionally, some youth initiated and ran their own self-organizations such as KITAD.

The greatest asymmetries occurred in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation, as corresponding with the research of Dinbabo and colleagues (2021). The vast majority of leaders and representatives of formalized self-organizations we met were heterosexual men,[66] revealing a pronounced gender disparity. This inequality was normalized at the time of research; interlocutors primarily addressed the roles of women within families, households, and communities as mothers, caretakers, and supporters, but rarely as leaders and representatives of self-organizations. This reflects the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and social order that ascribe decision-making roles to men while women are expected to be subordinate (see also Mulumba 2010; Krause 2021). The restrictions and difficulties women face in building, leading, and maintaining self-organizations are reflected in their limited representation and visibility. We found only a few women in leadership positions. In those rare cases, women were primarily in charge of small formalized self-organizations such as the cultural dance group in Kyaka II or leading informal collectives. Women leading larger formalized self-organizations such as REAL or ASOFRA in Kampala were outliers. Moreover, even those refugee-led organizations that focus on the support of women specifically were mostly established and governed by men.[67] This contributes to the existence of significant gaps in the support offered and associated challenges, as such services are developed and provided based ultimately on the lived experiences of men.

Moreover, LGBTQ+ leaders and representatives of self-organizations were very rare.[68] Yet it is not only that they are less visible; their self-organizing efforts are also limited and complicated by the legal

66 Most self-identified as heterosexual.

67 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 31 January 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.

68 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

criminalization, political oppression, and widespread discrimination they experience in Uganda (see Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015; Thapa 2015; Bompani and Valois 2017; Jjuuko and Mutesi 2018; HRAPF 2023). This does not mean that self-organizations comprised of LGBTQ+ refugees do not exist – on the contrary, they do, and the extensive risks make their self-organizing even more important. In many instances, it is their self-organized support, along with their strategies for hiding themselves, their gender identities, and sexual orientations – thus strategically remaining invisible within the social surrounding – that affords some self-protection for LGBTQ+ refugees (Camminga 2020; Kostenius et al. 2022; Krause and Segadlo 2024). However, their scarce visibility in leadership of self-organizations reproduces and exacerbates the isolation and marginalization of LGBTQ+ refugees, and their inclusion and involvement in communities as well as their advocacy for their rights remain weak. Interlocutors encounter considerable difficulties in building and maintaining their initiatives, engaging in strategic collaborations, being accepted as partners, accessing funding, and balancing the difficult task of creating visibility for their self-organizations while ensuring the safety and invisibility of their members.[69] The leaders and representatives of larger formalized LGBTQ+ self-organizations who gain visibility – including the Director of one such organization who reflects on their activities and struggles in chapter 5 – put themselves in danger in order to provide material and immaterial protection and assistance as well as advocate for the rights of their members.

Since new self-organizations are continuously established and existing ones undergo processes of change, the scope of the gender imbalances herein can of course evolve and improve over time. Yet, gendered practices manifest as a structural issue, as related to the traditional roles ascribed to men and women – with LGBTQ+ people largely neglected. The gender imbalance among leaders and representatives of formalized self-organizations we found during research therefore mirrors and reproduces of broader social developments in Uganda. In the country's patriarchal and heteronormative system, heterosexual men are more likely to be recognized and supported in leadership roles, thereby reinforcing the existing social norms and biases. This dynamic not only impacts who gets to lead and shape the direction of self-organizations but also influences whose voices are heard and prioritized in the larger discourse.

69 Anonymous.

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

The ways in which leadership is practised in formalized self-organizations vary greatly. We previously noted that leaders and representatives often finance the activities of their self-organizations from their own resources. This approach is not only rooted in and caused by the scarcity of available funding but also appears to primarily result from their compassionate and unwavering commitment to contributing to improvements in the community. The genuine desire to serve the greater good emerges as a recurring theme, repeatedly emphasized by interlocutors in dialogues and discussions. One leading member of a self-organization in its founding phase would emphasize the following:

> This group is not only a business group. We have dreams, we are looking for the future of the youth. So the money will not [be] going to our pockets, but it will be put in the association. It is a sacrifice … Maybe there is no profit at all before we are leaving to some other place. But even when I am gone, I will be happy if I hear about this group later and I will know I was among [those] who started it. So we start it now, but someone else will be benefiting from it.[70]

Many interlocutors spoke about such compassionate objectives as well as leaders and representatives who were highly respected in the community due to their steadfast commitment. We also met many leaders and representatives who did not introduce themselves as such or come across as eager to speak about *their* achievements and influence, despite the many years of engagement they turned out to have given the community. Their prime interest did not seem to revolve around political visibility for their own selves. Contrary to the assumption that "charismatic leaders make a difference" (Pincock et al. 2020, 29), the leaders we spoke with might not be perceived as "charismatic" by governmental authorities, Western donors, international organizations, and the humanitarian landscape more broadly, but they were certainly crucial figures in their communities due to their long-term commitment.[71]

70 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kyaka II.

71 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with ten women, 16 November 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2016, Kyaka II.

The vital social roles of such leaders and representatives of self-organizations were widely recognized by interlocutors in Kampala and Kyaka II. Many referred to individuals who had founded such organizations sometimes as long ago as two decades; although some had left Uganda by the time we conducted our research following either repatriation or resettlement to a third safe country, they were frequently mentioned by names, their backgrounds were summarized, and their stories, courage, and impact on establishing and maintaining self-organizations upheld.[72] Thus, these individuals and subsequently the initiatives sometimes can also form link to other parts of the world. For instance, the organization Live in Green, Live in Wealth in Kyaka II was even initiated and funded from a person who was resettled to the United States.[73] This indicates the significance – not to mention enduring legacy – of those leaders and representatives who are committed to the self-organizations they lead and the communities they seek to support as a collective endeavour.

Interlocutors who had access to services furthermore recognized the important support they receive – not only from the self-organizations per se but especially also individual leaders and representatives. Among them was a young woman who explained, "[w]e have group leaders who we always talk to, and they tell us how to behave and how to protect ourselves against problems."[74] A young man noted how leaders can occasionally put themselves in personal danger when providing support: "Some organizational leaders who try to organize something like protests to raise awareness of the refugee plight clash with the government."[75] Risking their own well-being and prioritizing their support of the greater good, being available for other people at all or most times, and spending their own money on self-organizations' upkeep constitute just some examples of how compassionate leaders and representatives both provide support to communities and face significant challenges as a result.

Yet, interlocutors also pointed to leaders and representatives who appeared to place their own personal gain centre stage, seeking through their endeavours to gain influence and power, but hardly

72 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.

73 Anonymous.

74 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 July 2017, Kampala.

75 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 November 2016, Kampala.

supporting the people concerned in the process. For example, one person who took part in vocational training with a particular self-organization noted that "[w]hen we report a problem to the leaders, they don't address this problem."[76] Others recalled how a certain leader sent them away as they tried to address issues,[77] or how another "sits at home as if he is a king. He just sits at home and doesn't move around to see what problems are existing and how people are."[78]

Such issues were also addressed in a discussion with five people from DR Congo.[79] One woman criticized the "poor leadership" in some self-organizations and noted that some of those at the helm focus solely on their own ideas but fail to give sufficient consideration to what is needed in the community. She further lamented that "when they get better opportunities [they] leave." A young man agreed, highlighting similarly that, "whenever we had a successful initiative taking off, the leaders leave." Since those individuals would have the key knowledge about the work and the network required to continue it, the young man added that "the organization dies off." Hence, if self-organizations are initiated, governed, and maintained by one leader only, then their absence can contribute to the disruption or even collapse of the collective.

Some leaders and representatives we spoke to also addressed these issues, including the challenges of mediating between the different types of leaders, tensions arising with those who prioritize their own benefits, and balancing the existing constraints without losing the trust of the community and/or members.[80] These insights reveal that tensions arise not only due to competition over funding but can also erupt over power struggles between leaders and representatives. One man strongly criticized the lack of collaboration and some leaders' focus on themselves: "The failure of the refugee-led organizations to come to common ground has cost us as refugee-led organizations so much. All have egos, big ones, no one wants to serve but to be served. But we have to come to a point and realize that unless we unite, other

76 Man from Rwanda, dialogue, 22 June 2017, Kampala.
77 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.
78 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
79 Discussion with five women and three men from DR Congo, 14 November 2016, Kampala.
80 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.

players will keep doing [the] job for us, yet those people do not know what makes us 'bleed' like we do."[81]

Another man even recalled how a leader of one self-organization took resources for himself after the other founders had left Uganda.[82] He criticized "the organization [for] serving [the leader's] own interests without accepting any other person's ideas," adding, "he kept telling lies to his fellow founders that the organization wasn't running at all and that it was struggling financially." The man went on to explain how, in stark contrast, the leader had collected funds from members and other donors but continued to "share false information" for personal gain. After some time, constituents "realized the organization was being run as a [one-person] organization," involved the police, and voted for new leadership. Looking back at these issues, our interlocutor stressed, "[h]e took advantage of his role as a founding member and his position in society."

The latter case reflects how intense challenges can become, but we did not encounter any other such cases during our research – instead, emphasis on the supportive roles of self-organizations' leaders and representatives was much more common. The information shared by interlocutors nonetheless demonstrates how varying approaches to leadership, power, influence, and resources can evolve among representatives. Such issues and tendencies of leadership are not limited to self-organizations; indeed, they also occur among entities like international organizations and NGOs working in relief and development worldwide (e.g., Orgad 2013; Thrall et al. 2014; Mitchell et al. 2020).

Refugees' Formalized Self-Organizations as (Unrecognized) Actors in Uganda's Refugee Regime

With their expertise, extensive support structures, and various forms of collaboration, formalized self-organizations essentially contribute to the collective protection and assistance of refugees and are thus a core part of Uganda's refugee regime. But are they also treated as such in the regime? In the following section, we discuss ways in which some of the formalized self-organizations strategically represent themselves as partners in Uganda's refugee regime and explore the scant

81 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 12 December 2016, Kampala.
82 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 December 2016, Kampala.

recognition they receive from government authorities and aid organizations. This paradox weighs heavily and places self-organizations in perpetually subordinate roles, despite their significant contributions.

Refugees' Formalized Self-Organizations Strategically Representing Themselves as Equal Partners

Supported not least by the great operational range and catalyzed by collaborations with other self-organizations and with government authorities and aid organizations, both in Uganda and globally, some leaders proactively represent their organizations as actors in Uganda's refugee regime – thus ones that have to be taken seriously and involved in decision-making processes. Strategies for such self-representation vary, including engaging in local, national, and global partnerships (like RELON Uganda) and using a vernacular that reproduces humanitarian speak to stress their relevance to and expertise about the aid apparatus and related decision making. Common for the latter is for leaders and representatives of (independently established) self-organizations to express their important roles in promoting self-reliance – the key marker of Uganda's protection policies. This applies not only to refugees' self-organizations in Kyaka II, where the aid apparatus is active, but also to those based in and focusing on Kampala, an urban area where no formalized humanitarian structures exist at present.

For example, among the above-noted formalized self-organizations, REAL, YARID, KITAD, HRA, PEPA, HOCW, REHORE, and the Bondeko Centre explicitly stated they were promoting self-reliance when we spoke.[83] Moreover, some organizations also express their objectives and self-understandings online, serving to simultaneously increase their visibility in Uganda and globally. YARID, for example, provides detailed information of its history, partnerships, and the scope of its work on its website, including stating that "Women's Empowerment & Livelihoods provides vocational skills training, business development support, and life skills workshops to empower refugee women to build economic resilience."[84] HOCW lays out online the vision of "[a] world where every person has the hope, confidence,

83 Anonymous.

84 See Young African Refugees for Integral Development, "Women's Empowerment & Livelihoods," https://www.yarid.org/copy-of-education-1 (link defunct; last accessed 12 August 2023).

and necessary means to be self-reliant and achieve their own definition of wellbeing."[85] The Bondeko Centre refers to UNHCR's livelihood and self-reliance strategies in outlining on its website that,

> Especially because urban refugees are not provided with material assistance (such as shelter or food), refugees in Kampala strive to become self-reliant. However, many do not know English when they first arrive in Uganda and struggle to find programs where they can become trained in livelihoods. The Bondeko Refugee Livelihoods Center addresses this gap by providing a Livelihoods Program run by refugees themselves, where refugees can learn skills in their own native language as well as learn English, and find a community to develop social networks within and beyond.[86]

By reproducing humanitarian speak, refugee-led organizations translate information about their operations in a manner that aligns with the narratives and expectations of Uganda's refugee regime. This translation process not only facilitates communication with government authorities and humanitarian organizations; by drawing on and replicating language and objectives, refugee-led organizations prove their knowledge about the political strategies being pursued, express how their expertise corresponds with and contributes to these endeavours, and reveal how they, too, strive toward realizing common overarching aims. Consequently, they proactively represent themselves as equal partners to the traditional actors in aid provision.

With regards to agency, this translates into how these organizations have developed a "set of preconscious expectations about the future" that can become "strategically mobilized in accordance with the contingencies of particular empirical situations" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 978). *Strategically* here should not be understood as instrumentalized, but rather as a manoeuvre among the available repertoires. More concretely, one may assume that refugee-led organizations are instrumentalizing themselves for the humanitarian apparatus – that is, giving up on their core objectives to be recognized and

85 See Hope of Children and Women Victims of Violence, "What We Do," https://www.hopeofchildrenandwomen.org/what-we-do (last accessed 12 August 2023).

86 See Bondeko Refugee Livelihoods Center, "Context," https://www.bondekocenter.com/about (link defunct; last accessed 12 August 2023).

gain a seat at the decision-making table. However, a closer look at the process reveals that they continue to focus on the specific objectives and support structures they collectively set out to pursue in response to the very challenges faced daily by displaced people in Kampala and/or Kyaka II. In reality, then, they are ultimately being pragmatic and strategic, emphasizing their important work in order to be accepted as relevant actors while continuing to hold on to the particular endeavours they find important and seek to achieve in the first place.

This is also evident in the range of activities that refugees self-organize with the aim of claiming involvement in political and humanitarian forums. They mobilize peaceful protests and public debates in Kampala and Kyaka II – on World Refugee Day, for example – to raise awareness about prevailing challenges,[87] maintain public presence on social media platforms such as X or LinkedIn, in addition to their websites, and advocate for their right to be heard and involved. The motto "Nothing about us without us"[88] – originating from various global initiatives[89] – centrally mirrors such efforts aiming for the involvement of people with lived experience of displacement in dialogues with policy-makers, humanitarian organizations, and the broader public, and highlights the pursuit of a more inclusive and responsive (inter)national refugee regime.

Their networking plays a particular role here as reflected in the self-description of RELON Uganda, which accordingly seeks to "contribute to policy making affecting refugees, fundraise and mobilize resources for supporting refugee work in Uganda."[90] Hence, they

87 E.g., see https://twitter.com/KrlonOfficial/status/1671112008605769732 (link defunct; last accessed 14 August 2023); https://twitter.com/relonuganda/status/1672256409176535040 (link defunct; last accessed 14 August 2023); https://twitter.com/relonuganda/status/1671102662492692487 (link defunct; last accessed 14 August 2023); https://twitter.com/relonuganda/status/1671107593585012737 (link defunct; last accessed 14 August 2023).

88 See https://twitter.com/relonuganda/status/1671102662492692487 (link defunct; last accessed 14 August 2023).

89 The motto was used in the past to promote participation of people with disabilities (see, e.g., Charlton 1998) and guided the creation of the Network for Refugee Voices in 2017 and the inaugural Global Summit of Refugees in June 2018 (Mustafa 2018).

90 See Refugee-Led Organization Network of Uganda, "About Us," https://relonuganda.org/about-3/ (last accessed 14 August 2023).

strategically work to overcome the enduring system of top-down decision making in the humanitarian system as evident in policy-making *about* but not *with* refugees, in the process requesting a seat at the table. This extends to a global scale. For example, the GRN has this as a core aim.[91] Exactly this aspiration is also reflected in the name of another globally operating refugee-led organization: Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT). Led by Mustafa Alio and Rez Gardi and based in Canada, R-SEAT is "an international initiative working to enhance the effectiveness of global refugee responses, by co-designing mechanisms to amplify refugee leadership ecosystems and increase the participation of refugees at state levels in a meaningful, sustainable, and transformative way."[92]

The Uganda-based self-organizations and efforts outlined above therefore correspond with similar global ones, as ultimately striving to prove that refugees are actors in the regime locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. However, does language translate into actions and do government authorities and aid actors in Uganda work with refugees and their organizations and treat them as partners in the regime?

Government Authorities and Aid Organizations' Insufficient Acknowledgment and Strategic Indifference to Refugees' Formalized Self-Organizations

The attention and pressure generated by refugees' self-organizations locally and globally have led to a shift toward intensified recognition from political and humanitarian actors (for global perspectives, see chapter 7). But how do people experience this in Uganda?

In Kampala as well as Kyaka II, some leaders and representatives of formalized self-organizations noted collaborating with humanitarian and political actors. YARID, for example, reported working with UNHCR, Soccer Without Borders, FRC, and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund, among others. The Bondeko Centre was said to "sometimes" have partnerships with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), FRC, InterAid, the Refugee Law Project, the African Center for Treatment of Torture Victims (ACTV), UNHCR, and OPM.

91 See Global Refugee-Led Network, "About Us," https://www.global-refugeenetwork.org/about-us (link defunct; last accessed 14 August 2023).

92 See Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table, home page, https://refugeesseat.org/ (last accessed 14 August 2023).

HRA worked with UNHCR and the FRC. The group Live in Green, Live in Wealth in Kyaka II collaborated with the organization Nsamizi Training Institute for Social Development to that extent that the latter had since completely managed their finances[93] (on Kampala, see also Pincock et al. 2020, 31–52). Such collaborations are an important vehicle to enhance the work of refugee-led organizations, amplify the rights, needs, and interests of displaced people, and advocate for political improvements. Several formalized self-organizations also showcase their objectives, work, and range of partnerships on their websites, articulating their visions for a broader audience and revealing the standing they have developed over time.

However, all representatives and leaders of self-organizations we spoke with addressed structural challenges, including restrictive conditions, scarce funding, and deficient co-operation. Crucially, they experience insufficient recognition and integration in decision making by government authorities and aid organizations. Among them was a representative who noted that "[s]ome agencies will see you as a problem, and others will see you as a resource,"[94] illustrating the complex navigation required in the camp's humanitarian landscape. Leaders and representatives recounted their struggles with hierarchical structures, where attempts at engagement and collaboration were met with rejection.[95] For instance, one remarked, "[t]he big stakeholders like UNHCR don't want to work directly with refugee-led organizations, and as a result refugee-led organizations are limited due to a lack of money."[96] Another explained how the actors intervene in funding opportunities: "There is a lot of profiling of refugee-led organizations. When we interact with donors, the donors go to service providers like OPM and question our reputation, and in the end it limits us."[97] Echoing a widespread sentiment, another lamented, "[t]hey don't consult refugees. Often, they have their people who assume what refugees want."[98]

93 Anonymous.
94 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.
95 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.
96 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 November 2016, Kampala.
97 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 November 2016, Kampala.
98 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

Moreover, tensions can arise. A representative shared his experiences of past co-operation with certain agencies, noting that they "clashed" when the self-organization refused to align the work as told. "They were intimidating us," he said, explaining how they were supposed to suspend their community-support projects. The struggles were ongoing when we met and he noted that "now we are trying to dialogue and [to] see how we can refresh our coordination."[99] Such tensions and control practices were not unique to this case but were also experienced by other interlocutors,[100] leading to serious repercussions. This is particularly critical given that the limited funding available within Uganda is often controlled by the agencies, which can suspend it at their discretion.

Beyond the lack of support, co-operation, and recognition, the agencies are even criticized for intentionally marginalizing refugee-led organizations' work, as one representative detailed:

> Only when you make a lot of noise [do] they see you. But you know what they will tell you? You don't have the capacity. So for me, this is the question. My capacities are seen in my own community, but only in these organizations, that's when my capacity is unseen. Why? Why silencing us? Why invisibilizing refugee efforts? Why? Even when we have tried [to speak with the] agencies, no one wants to talk about it. No one wants to recognize our efforts. Many people come in [referring to visits of international donors], as you know, but they don't see us.[101]

These critiques reveal a disconnect between the expertise and urgent support needs of refugees' self-organizations and the hierarchical decision making of government authorities and aid organizations, which fail to recognize and treat refugees and their self-organizations as actors and partners in the regime. In the context of Lebanon, Diab, Jasiukaitis, and El-Zakka (2024) similarly identify systemic challenges faced by refugee-led organizations. They critically examine the application of inclusivity in humanitarian operations and reflect power imbalances and tokenistic inclusion that hinder the effectiveness of

99 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
100 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.
101 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.

refugee-led organizations. Corresponding with our research on Uganda, their study highlights how refugee-led organizations, despite their pivotal role in supporting Syrian and Palestinian refugees, often struggle against entrenched power dynamics and marginalization, impeding their potential as principal stakeholders in humanitarian efforts.

Interlocutors in Uganda further highlighted that if collaborations emerge at all, these are hardly formalized as sustainable partnerships on an equal footing. Instead, self-organizations are frequently relegated as merely subordinate *helpers* – without sufficient resources or recognition of their work and networks. As such, self-organizations are involved when they serve the interests of those in power; otherwise, their existence and services are invisibilized or merely tolerated. This dynamic leads to a situation where, as one representative pointedly criticized, aid organizations "exploit us as refugee-led organizations."[102]

This discrepancy creates a critical paradox: Despite the imposing challenges of deficient co-operation, control practices, and even neglect, which complicate the efforts of refugee-led organizations, the agencies – and Uganda's refugee regime more broadly – rely on the essential support that refugees have been mobilizing and providing in their self-organizations for years. This incongruity aligns with Norman's (2019, 2020) finding that states employ not only liberal and repressive strategies but also ones of indifference. Norman argues that, despite awareness of refugees' needs, some states strategically *choose* not to allocate resources, forcing other actors, mainly international organizations and domestic NGOs, to step in and provide necessary services (Norman 2019, 43). Whereas the Government of Uganda has a long history of engaging with refugees, working closely with international and domestic organizations, the protection and assistance measures remain insufficient, as evidenced in chapter 3 and other studies (e.g., Kaiser 2005, 2006; Mulumba 2010; Clark-Kazak 2010b, 2011; Ilcan et al. 2015; Kwiringira et al. 2018; Ruzibiza and Berckmoes 2022; Sebba and Zanker 2022; Grześkowiak 2024). This situation ultimately compels refugees to self-organize for collective support.[103] Thus, such "indifference-as-policy" (Norman 2019, 43) in Uganda manifests in neoliberal structures as refugees' self-organizations are (indirectly)

102 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala.

103 This does not mean that refugees' informal and formalized self-organizations emerge solely in reaction to the insufficient humanitarian system. As reflected in chapter 2, they also occur proactively.

made responsible for handling the situation without changing the restrictions and limitations so as to do so sufficiently, and without acknowledging their work. Hence varying levels of marginalization, from repressive control to invisibilization, remain in place.

It remains to be seen whether the recently established Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) in the context the CRRF can bring about change here by formally involving chosen refugee representatives in decision making. Thus far, the criticism shared by interlocutors is that conditions are highly difficult for displaced people and their formalized self-organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have explored how refugees' formalized self-organizations pursue their objectives to provide vital support in, for, and with the community. As a result of their lived experience of displacement, encampment, and life in exile, the leaders, representatives, and members of such self-organizations know best what the community's needs are, and via their networks can provide such support. This is evident in the reflections shared by Noella Kabale about the complex support REAL offers. It is furthermore revealed in the great variety of services that self-organizations provide, ranging from immediate assistance in times of emergency, to long-term support, to political advocacy. They develop expertise by establishing these services and related structures, becoming highly visible in the process. Our findings thus reveal how they collectively deal with and contest the restrictive conditions imposed on them. This aligns with research debates, including the volume about *Refugees' Roles in Resolving Displacement and Building Peace*, edited by Bradley, Milner, and Peruniak (2019), reaffirming that refugees represent agents who ultimately shape their political and socio-economic circumstances, and thus possess the capacity to develop localized and contextualized solutions. These solutions often diverge from externally prescribed frameworks. As such, formalized self-organizations are recognized and appreciated in the community, yet traditional actors of Uganda's refugee regime still neglect them and their work; as one interlocutor powerfully said, "if the community has accepted us, why are you still denying us?"[104]

104 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.

Although diverse, some challenges stay the same for formalized self-organizations, and these revolve around the resources their work requires – be it personally or financially. This affects the abilities of their leaders as well as their members to manage with limited resources and recognition. One way to enhance their reach and operations is for leaders and representatives of formalized self-organizations to enter into strategic collaborations with each other and – as much as possible – aid organizations in Uganda and globally. A key strategy is to join forces in formalized networks, most notably RELON Uganda and KRLON. Such networking and fundamentally initiating and maintaining formalized self-organizations can become an exhausting undertaking, though. This chapter has also explored how leaders and representatives of self-organizations are highly committed to serving communities, but also how rivalry, competition, and mistrust can emerge among them.

The relational agency framework following Emirbayer and Mische (1998) provides a critical lens through which to understand these dynamics. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within social contexts and highlights how collective (inter)actions shape not only individual agency but also the surrounding structures – in this case the self-support and self-protection these self-organizations offer and the humanitarian aid system they influence. The routines are central here, as formalized self-organizations frequently function and provide support over the long term. Their routines are "not mechanically or situationally determined," but reflect "a process of selection from practical repertoires of habitual activity" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980). This means that while self-organizations respond to immediate needs, they also develop consistent methods of operation that allow them to adapt and sustain their efforts over time. Such routines help establish trust and reliability within the communities they serve, reinforcing their role as crucial actors in the humanitarian system and Uganda's broader refugee regime.

In the case of formalized self-organizations, this means that while leaders and members strive to serve their communities, their efforts are embedded within a network of social relations that can both support and hinder their objectives. Formalized organizations certainly gain and enjoy high visibility through the important work they do in, for, and with communities – hereby revealing themselves to be pivotal actors in refugee protection and assistance. Yet, at the same time, they remain widely invisible and barely acknowledged in the

political and humanitarian arenas – as elsewhere around the world too (Bahram 2020; Alio and Gardi 2021; Diab et al. 2024). Thus far, it has taken refugee-led organizations aligning with the core interests of government authorities and aid organizations to be recognized by them; this has not, to date, resulted in them being treated as equal actors and partners, though some progress toward this is now underway. We can only hope that the increasing integration of refugee representatives into political debates both in Uganda and globally will indeed further transform their meaningful participation into a global norm, as discussed by Milner, Alio, and Gardi (2022).

5

"We Live in a Group"

Individuals, Social Support, and Everyday Self-Organization

Having experienced violent conflict and displacement, a person's arrival in a new context presents a range of challenges and uncertainties. One woman from Somalia aptly stated, "[l]iving in a country with new cultures, new everything, needs and takes a lot of patience and courage."[1] Like her, conversation partners in Kampala and Kyaka II addressed various challenges before, during, and after fleeing to Uganda. However, they also consistently emphasized the crucial role of their self-organization in their well-being. Drawing on social support from informal and formalized self-organizations helped them arrive, cope with the many obstacles, and build a life in exile – establishing the grounds for arrival, finding accommodation or employment, learning about and claiming rights, collectively caring for children, building friendships for mutual support, offering some stability in one's everyday life, and getting help in times of need.

This self-organized social support was also key for a young man from DR Congo who had recently arrived in Kampala.[2] He described the difficulty of not knowing where to go and lacking a source of income. Shortly after arriving, he met five other young Congolese men by chance. They advised him on where to live near Congolese refugees in Kampala and quickly formed a close bond. They spoke about their experiences, began sharing accommodation, helped each other in their everyday

1 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
2 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

lives, pooled resources for essentials like rent, food, and electricity, and learned English together to be able to interact with Ugandans and find work. Although he worried about his future and found living in one room "uncomfortable," their self-organized collective support provided him relief, encouragement, and security. He describes his friends as the linchpin of his social life – emphasizing, "we live in a group."

The powerful statement of living in a group echoes the sentiments of many interlocutors. This small group of friends is not merely a random circle of people who met accidentally and stayed together due to similar experiences and challenges. Instead, it exemplifies a vital self-organization that they, like other refugees in Uganda, actively establish, maintain, and rely on. It became family-like to them. Such self-organized support systems are crucial not only for displaced individuals but for people worldwide. However, the relevance of self-organized collectives increases for refugees because of the restrictive structures they face in Uganda and beyond – marked by humanitarian, political and legal constraints, economic hardships, risks of violence, and myriad uncertainties that often persist for years, if not decades.

Social-support collectives' significant value for individual coping has been a feature of forced migration studies for many years. Research shows that social support – whether among families, friendship groups, religious associations, or broader communities – is a crucial aspect of coping with displacement and creating new lives and livelihoods in exile (see Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012; Gladden 2012; Seguin and Roberts 2017). This can take various forms like assistance provided via networks during flight (e.g., Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Wissink and Mazzucato 2018; Alencar et al. 2019), contributing to home-making in protracted situations (e.g., Boer 2015; Brun 2015; Omata 2016), and sharing support in and through familial systems in exile (e.g., Betancourt et al. 2015; Lokot 2018; Heilmann 2022; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2023). Not only despite but also due to the oftentimes precarious conditions encountered in countries of asylum, studies stress how refugees self-organize support with and for each other, find solutions together for the problems they face, and amass significant resources (e.g., Oka 2011; Jacobsen et al. 2014; Omata 2017a).

At the core of this chapter are the social meanings of refugees' self-organization as practices of engaging in collective activities and as institutional entities that people establish and lead. Addressing the full social values of self-organization, of course, exceeds the scope of this book, and in fact any single piece of writing. Rather, we focus on the

common social strategies through, for, and in self-organizations that individuals shared upon arrival and after living in the camp and the city. Such strategies exhibit the social embeddedness of people practising agency, individually and collectively, and emphasize the mundane aspect of agentic orientation when organizing one's social environment. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische, navigating social and temporal contexts is central; actors' practices are informed by past experiences and future projections, negotiated through interaction with others, revealing agency as a process "*toward* something" (1998, 973). Hereby individuals' actions can trigger collective ones, deeply intertwined with the surrounding social relations and structures. Agency thus manifests in various aspects of people's daily lives, and we are especially interested in the social embeddedness of refugees and their diverse forms of self-organization, reflecting the interdependent, fluent processes of individual and collective actions.

As such, self-organization also takes on various forms and is multilayered, with individuals assuming different roles across diverse social networks, each person acting as a unique node in their own social landscape. However, since individuals are interconnected with others, the decision to self-organize in one area can also affect those around them. For instance, one young man described how being part of a church community in Kampala enabled him to access certain resources, which he then contributed to a local agricultural initiative. Here we can also see how some forms of self-organization are entangled with other ones, including those of external actors. An individual's actions are therefore always also a result of the (collective) conditions around them, just as much as they impact others – something the concept of relational agency aims to grasp.

We begin by examining how refugees in Kampala and Kyaka II draw on self-organized social support systems to cope with the precarious conditions of arrival and learning about the new environments. Refugees and their self-organizations thus serve as first responders to those in need upon arrival. Turning to life in the camp and the city, we analyze how individuals strategically use mobilities, shape neighbourhoods collectively, and develop shared spaces of belonging where they feel comfortable and support each other. Finally, we explore their self-organized collectives as sources of safety and hope, but also of risk and burden. Everyday examples of life in the camp and the city reveal the importance of self-organized collectives closest to individuals like families and friends. Caring for family and

children fosters social belonging, but challenges such as family separation, worries about lost loved ones, and domestic violence also arise. Friendships, another form of intimate social self-organization, also provide protection and support, but can also entail risks. Moreover, formalized self-organizations often represent key sources of hope and belief in times of long-term uncertainty.

We open this chapter with the reflections written by Paul*, who fled DR Congo. As mentioned in the chapter 1, he wished to remain anonymous given that he recounts the multi-faceted and interdependent personal issues he and his family experienced arriving and living in Uganda. For the book, he suggested we use the pseudonym Paul for his contribution. We are endlessly grateful to him for sharing his reflections and allowing us to include it here.

DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES OF FLIGHT, ARRIVAL, AND LIFE IN UGANDA

*Paul**

FIRST EXPERIENCE

In November 1996, we could hear shooting rather close by in the afternoon. It came from Tshengerero, the trading center in Rutshuru territory in North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The shooting caused great panic in the neighboring village Bunagana, especially because rebels had massacred more than sixty people in the previous week. My wife and I decided to flee for our lives. My wife carried our daughter who was one year old and I picked up only the small bag in which I used to keep my certificates.

Our home was about a kilometer away from the border. We ran very fast, and within a very short time we crossed the border into Uganda. On the road to the border we found other people fleeing into Uganda. No sooner had we crossed the border than thousands of troops of the Ugandan army heavily armed entered the region to support the rebels who were advancing to overthrow the government of the dictator Mobutu Seseko who had ruled the country for thirty years.

Immediately after crossing the border, the Ugandan army and police officers gathered all the refugees in a marketplace. Many journalists both national and international had already come and documented the procedures. We spent the night in the marketplace and the

following morning we were made to walk around twelve kilometers under a very strict guard of police officers to a place called Nyakanbande refugee transit camp.

In the transit camp, all the refugees were required to register with Ugandan police and UNHCR, then the Uganda Red Cross Society provided tents commonly known as sheeting, food, and other nonfood items. Everyone was given a small plot where to pitch our tents. I remember that within a week the transit camp had more than 12,000 refugees.

Life in the transit camp was very difficult. Food was not enough, but the most challenging aspect of life was the hygiene and sanitation. Pit latrines were very dirty and mostly crowded. To avoid that people would urinate anywhere in between the tents. A lot of children died in the transit camp because of poor sanitation and pneumonia.

We lived in this condition for five months. Then in April 1997 we were transferred to Kyangwali Refugee Settlement in Hoima District. In the morning of 12 April 1997, a procession of lorries entered the transit camp to transport us to Kyangwali. Names were called, and at every call a family would get into the lorry. When they called my name, my wife took our little daughter and we climbed in the lorry and sat there with the little items we had received from the Uganda Red Cross Society. Within a very short time, the fifteen lorries were full and there we embarked on the long journey to Kyangwali. Sounds of the lorries combined with refugees' singing made a very nice melody which echoed into the hills of Nyakabande and attracted the natives of Nyakabande village who stood on the road side waving bye to the refugees.

The journey was very long and exhausting; we travelled for the whole day and reached a place called Kyenjojo in western Uganda at around midnight. We spent the rest of the night there, and the following morning we went on with the journey and reached Kyangwali in the afternoon.

LIFE IN KYANGWALI REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

kyangwali Refugee Settlement was a big bush and home for baboons, warthog, pythons and other poisonous snakes. We were taken into Kinakyeitaka primary school, and after two days every family was allocated a plot of fifty by fifty meters for farming. AVSI, the implementing agency of UNHCR, provided us with all farm tools and seeds of every type; OPM gave us another piece of land to grow food.

I pitched my tent in the middle of the bush in my plot. My wife, our little daughter and I had to sleep in the tent surrounded by a big bush. We did not have a mattress and had to collect soft grasses on which we laid a blanket to sleep on.

One of the following mornings, there was a big, green snake lying beside our daughter. My wife jumped out of the tent carrying our daughter shouting, "Death! Death!" I also jumped, following her. It took me some time to make her calm down and to tell me what she had seen. I called two refugees from the neighboring plots to help me kill the big snake.

Clearing the bush to prepare it for farming was challenging; it was fighting with snakes, and I remember one day I killed ten big snakes, which disturbed me for several weeks. I dreamed of the snakes coming to bite me and shouted throughout the night. People took me to the hospital saying that I had cerebral malaria but the truth was that I was suffering from all the experiences of the past.

Not long after we reached Kyangwali, my wife suffered from malaria. She was hospitalized in Kyangwali health center for one week. From that time malaria weakened her, and as a consequence she miscarried two times in three years.

We faced a lot of difficulties in the settlement. Most difficulties were around food; food was not enough, and many times we received maize and there were no grinding machines where we could go and get our maize grinded. The only place where we could get our maize grinded was in Hoima town, which was around seventy miles away from the settlement. AVSI foundation was the only UNHCR implementing agency for a year and providing all the necessary services was a challenge.

The movement was restricted. Moving out of the camp was at the mercy of the camp commandant who would decide to or not to give a movement permit commonly known as "Kibali"; the furthest a refugee would be allowed to go was to the neighboring districts such as Kagadi district or to Lake Albert, which is near the settlement.

There was a big roadblock which was set just to control the movement of refugees, I remember one day my neighbor was kept in a police cell for the whole day just because he and other refugees were caught moving out of the settlement without the "Kibali," the movement permit.

Growing our own food was also another challenge. Yes, AVSI gave some maize, beans and some millet seeds to plant and the garden tools (machetes and hoes). However, clearing the big bush with blunt machetes was too difficult for me. Whenever I managed to clear a small portion and plant some beans and maize, wild animals, baboons and warthogs would come and destroy the entire garden. I remember the time I would spend many nights in the garden just to scare away the warthogs.

One day, my wife and I went to receive food at the food distribution point which was at around two kilometers away. We left some village children taking care of our garden. The children played and ran far from the garden, a herd of baboons invaded our maize garden and within a minute they had ravaged it all. It was a painful experience.

In all those difficulties we would get comfort and support from our community members, who had support groups such as a community ambulance system which used to carry our sick people using a hammock. We formed support groups in every village and we would contribute money to buy the locally made hammocks to carry our sick people to the hospital. AVSI had one ambulance and it could not respond to all the emergencies every time because it was the same ambulance which would take referrals to Hoima regional hospital and to Mulago national hospital. I remember my wife was the first person to be carried in the hammock during the night when she had the severe malaria that caused her first miscarriage. The community members were standing together with each other during such problems.

In January 2000, things seemed to change for the better. I was lucky to get a scholarship and I joined a university close to Kampala where I pursued a bachelor's degree in Social Work and Social Administration. Three years later, I graduated. Considering the bad condition in Kyangwali, I did not leave my family behind to study; I went with my wife and our little daughter to the university.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT

One night of November 2002, my wife who was pregnant got labor pains. The university provided a car to take her to a hospital in Kampala. There she was immediately taken to the maternity section.

The doctor who was on duty asked me who I was and I told him that I was a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo – formerly known as Zaïre. He turned his eyes against me and said, "You, from Zaïre! You are very bad people. You are the ones causing trouble in this region." After hearing his harsh statement I saw that my wife became very weak and the little energy she had went out of her.

The doctor hit his pen on the table and called with a loud voice, "Nurse!" There came a nurse running, the doctor told her, "Take your refugee to the ward, I am going." He immediately left the consultation room. The nurse told me, "You! Carry your wife to the ward." I was weak and stressed and was unable to carry my wife to the ward. The nurse called another nurse who came to help her transport my wife. But when they reached the bed in the ward, they released my wife and she fell down on her face and stomach. She immediately went unconscious. When they saw that she was unconscious they rushed her to the intensive care unit but it was too late. She was already dead.

The following morning, I left the hospital without knowing where I was going. University students found me on Jinja road in Kampala. They took me back to a hospital and from there the university provided a car to carry the dead body of my wife to the camp in Kyangwali where she was buried.

I hated myself, I hated being a refugee and I hated every doctor in this hospital. I hated living in Kyangwali again because I did not want to look at my wife's tomb at every moment. Hardly did I know that being a refugee is to be a curse in society and to be like a waste material. From that time, I have never told any Ugandan that I am a refugee.

Let the name "refugee" be given to an enemy, let it be a label to a foe because to the price of being a refugee I paid the life of my dear wife, to the price of being a refugee I acquired a painful identity on my profile, "a widower."

Generously contributed on 10 December 2022

ARRIVING IN THE CAMP AND THE CITY: REFUGEES AND THEIR SELF-ORGANIZATIONS AS FIRST RESPONDERS AND PROVIDERS

The period between arrival in Uganda and refugee status determination was unanimously described as highly difficult by interlocutors. Whether coming to Kampala or Kyaka II, people experience struggles and often lack fundamentals such as enough food or safe shelter. To handle these issues, they predominantly seek and draw on the support that other displaced people mobilize and provide. This support is not limited to material resources but also covers immaterial aspects, most importantly sharing situated knowledges and offering emotional and social support.

Reaching Kyaka II and Kampala – and Moving Between Different Sites

Most of the people in Kyaka II we spoke with were first accommodated in some form of transit camp, as a reception centre. These are located close to Uganda's national borders, with the newly arriving receiving short-term shelter and initial support like food and water, further to being registered by government authorities and aid organizations. Despite that, conditions are often dire; many interlocutors described how they received no or hardly any assistance in the transit camps, which is why they had to rely on the social support of others or quickly find some form of income. A young woman recalled that while staying in the transit camp, not knowing what would come next, she struggled to find shelter and food despite the aid provided: "I would have starved if it was not for the help from those families at the reception centre."[3]

After registration, they are brought to already-established camps such as Kyaka II. At first, they are settled in an interim area of the camp until their status is sorted. Once achieved, they are allocated plots of land on-site, but their difficulties continue. As Paul* recalled in his reflections above, everyday challenges, such as finding a safe place to sleep for himself and his family, clearing the land, and learning about the environment, remain. Many others also mentioned problems of access to aid services such as food provision, and the

3 Woman from Eritrea, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

necessity of learning to find their way around and deal with local conditions. One woman recalled how difficult life in Kyaka II was initially, and how improvement occurred only slowly after extensive hard work: "When I arrived here, I was suffering a lot. I was digging for people to get money, dig and harvest small, get some money, and start a charcoal business. That is how I survived. It was tough."[4]

Such issues also arise for those arriving in Kampala. Most interlocutors explained that they had purposefully decided to move to the city, primarily to avoid the difficult conditions in camps, seek better economic opportunities, or because they were used to and preferred urban life. One woman stressed that "life is so hard in the refugee settlement," adding later that "[t]he business environment is better in Kampala."[5] Many said that they knew where to go in Uganda through family or friendship ties (see also Anyanzu and de Wet-Billings 2022). As one man relayed, "refugees always keep in touch by phone with people at home, thus those coming know where to go."[6] However, those who lacked such social ties recalled feeling helpless upon their arrival in Uganda, not knowing where to go, and randomly ending up in Kampala (see also Bernstein and Okello 2007). Once in Kampala, they often sought out other refugees, self-organizations, or churches as a first step. One woman who came to Uganda with some others noted, "[w]e didn't know where to go, but lorry drivers helped us [and] led us here. We first stayed at a church."[7] Similarly, a man recalled that "coming to live in Kampala was by accident." While a known pastor shared some information about Kampala with him, he stressed, "Personally I had no clear idea of where to go."[8] Despite the varying circumstances of their arrival, all interlocutors who arrived in Kampala – whether by intention or chance – relied on the social support of others to survive, a pattern also evident among people newly arriving in Kyaka II.

Flight is by no means a rectilinear process of moving from one place to another, but is instead a highly dynamic one, marked by repeated mobilities and various "tours and detours," as Inhetveen argues (2010, 215; authors' translation). Interlocutors explained how they decided to relocate to a camp due to the lower costs of living and aid provided

4 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II.
5 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
6 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 November 2016, Kampala.
7 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
8 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

on-site, or to a city due to better living and livelihood conditions. They often took their decision after a period of trying to cater to their needs in the respective sites. Among them was a woman from Eritrea who described how difficult life in Uganda was since her arrival. She first went to Kampala and asked around about where the Eritrean community is located. Some people who ran a hostel provided her with accommodation, food, and information for the first three weeks. However, running out of money, she then decided to register with OPM and eventually move to Kyaka II.[9] A young man from DR Congo, meanwhile, described how he had looked for Congolese refugees in Uganda via social media after he realized he could not manage life by himself in Kampala anymore. When he connected with others online and learned that they were living in Kyaka II, he decided to move there. When we met, he was sharing a house with them in the camp[10] (on the role of social media and smartphones, see also Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Zijlstra and Liempt 2017; Alencar et al. 2019).

Interlocutors spoke even more frequently of the movement from camps to cities. The poor camp conditions mostly triggered their choice to leave, whether temporarily or long-term, but they also strategically sought to access more lucrative economic opportunities, better educational facilities, or medical services. As one man stressed, "there is a lot of suffering [in the camp], but here in Kampala you can work and earn something."[11] He first found shelter with other refugees, and later also a job through them. Another man shared similar experiences, though he "came to Kampala to study English and computer[s]," accessing the services of refugee-led organizations.[12] A woman also explained her choice to move in seeking better education for her four children, including access to university.[13] Others helped her find an apartment and provided information about schools.

Refugees' Self-Organizations as First Responders and Providers

> When you arrive here [in Kyaka II], you meet others; they tell you what is happening here and you discuss. The first time is hard. Before you even get the paper as [an] asylum-seeker you don't

9 Woman from Eritrea, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.
10 Discussion with six men, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.
11 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kampala
12 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
13 Women from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.

> get any assistance … For me, it took two weeks. During those two weeks you meet people who explain things to you. They tell you that here you have to take care of yourself. They tell you that you can go to other sites and work for money or food.[14]

This man's narrative reveals how it is refugees living on-site who provide crucial non-material support on arrival – "filling the information gaps" as Oduntan and Ruthven note (2021, 87). Those already living in the camp divulge how it functions, pass on situated knowledges they gained over time about local conditions, regulations, and dynamics, and direct the newly arriving to the relevant government authorities and aid organizations, guiding them through their formal and informal procedures. Given the outlined humanitarian focus on self-reliance and agriculture, this also includes informing newcomers about digging.[15] This applies equally in urban areas like Kampala. Although cities represent less restrictive and top-down governed environments, refugees must nonetheless learn how to navigate the city, where to find support, and how to generate income and ensure their safety.[16] A particularly common source of information were churches, where people were advised on where to live,[17] whom to contact for assistance,[18] how to gain employment,[19] and received much-needed words of comfort.[20]

Such support is by no means always highly structured. Instead, interlocutors explained how they improvise, come together spontaneously as needed, and provide ad hoc information. This extends to material support such as housing, food, or other essentials, as one woman detailed:

> If there are new arrivals and the agencies refuse to receive them, don't give them food, shelter etc., we can give them some food and even shelter, accommodate them in our place. Also, when

14 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.
15 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.
16 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from Somalia, dialogue, 12 November 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala.
17 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 January 2017, Kampala.
18 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 July 2017, Kampala.
19 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2017, Kampala.
20 E.g., man from Burundi, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

> there is harvesting season, you can give out some food for the hungry. If there is someone [who is] sick and has no money for medication you can give them some money so they can buy the drugs. If someone needs salt and lacks the money you can give some salt. This all is not only for new arrivals but for everyone who is in a bad place. Also, there are those people whose land has been reduced or taken away. So you can help them and even give some of your land for them to dig on. After harvesting, he goes and says thank you, and the next season you can give it to someone else. Sometimes they also give some beans to say thank you, but it is no obligation. It depends on the person. So it is ok if they don't give anything.[21]

People often remembered their own early trials and tribulations, having empathy with those arriving and wanting to help improve the dire conditions they faced. As one woman stressed, "I know the feeling of being hungry, and as I understand their position I cannot leave them alone."[22] Moreover, a man noted, "Of course, if you see that they are these new refugees and they are just coming and have nothing to eat, you cannot leave them go like that. Because I was passing that life also. So you give them one kg rice and one kg posho and a soap."[23] In this way, refugees' self-organizing often takes on the part of helping in emergency situations rather ad hoc and spontaneously. How crucial such support becomes is also evident in a discussion with two women and three men in Kyaka II. In addressing the key role of refugees' self-organizations, they stressed the necessity of mutual assistance and group formation to deal with the challenging conditions encountered in the camp. As one woman described, "One of the reasons we have these groups is the problems we encounter as refugees, and yet the office here is not helping us. We decided to come together and do something that could help us as refugees. So even if we did not receive assistance from the office, as refugees we can solve our problems."[24]

21 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.
22 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.
23 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.
24 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

In response to the increased needs of those newly arriving, some formalized self-organizations in Kampala initiate specialized programs to support them. In additional vocational training to enhance their likelihoods for income generation, they support them in finding accommodation, providing legal advice, and offering language classes.[25]

Yet, it is mostly individuals coming together in informal self-organizations who represent core first responders and providers in such times of need. Whether arriving with family members or alone, they offer spaces where those newly arriving can learn about unfamiliar milieus, establish social relations with others, receive support, and find their way to a new life in exile. Of course, displaced people are ultimately individual actors in pursuing their strategies and experiencing unique challenges; however, their embeddedness within social structures facilitates their exercise of agency.

LIVING IN THE CAMP AND THE CITY: SELF-ORGANIZING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND BELONGING

Refugees appear to be *dis-placed* and *up-rooted*, trapped in a discursive contradiction between "belonging (identity, community) and not belonging (uprooting, exile)" (Malkki 1995b, 514). This was aptly described by Paul* in his reflections above as well as by Bengekya Mugay Gédéon in his poem in chapter 3. People's lived experiences of displacement are not limited to the difficult journey away from their regions of origin to seek safety elsewhere but also affect their lives in exile. They are frequently being placed in designated areas, in its most extreme forms in camps where their rights are restricted (Agamben 1998; Agier 2011; Jaji 2012; Brankamp 2022), as evident in Uganda's encampment policy. This also entails a loss of habitual action, since prior routines are no longer available and people have to adapt to these new circumstances.

However, this does not mean that people passively give in and submit to such restrictions. Instead, they organize themselves by reaching out to others with whom they feel familiar, by communicating but also by producing proximity. Already after their arrival, people start to (re)organize, which over time – due to their protracted stay in exile – develops into an anchor for other people to access and

25 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.

become part of an evolving structure of support. Neither in the camp nor in the city do social collectives occur naturally or accidentally; rather, they represent core forms of social self-organization. Hence, they actively craft physical proximity and, based on that, social spaces together, for which they contribute to (re)producing social structures that enable them to exercise agency. In the following section, we explore how through physical proximity refugees collectively shape lives and neighbourhoods, self-organize social spaces of support, and enable each other's mobilities.-

Self-Organizing Physical Proximity in the Camp and the City

In Kyaka II, refugees' living arrangements are formally determined by external decisions, as OPM distributes land and sanctions unauthorized relocations. An authority figure explained this social engineering process through plot allocation guided by economic, cultural, and security considerations as follows: "First, we look into those ethnic groups who have conflicts with each other," seeking to keep them apart for "security." He added, "[t]hose cultural differences matter a lot. They help someone to settle down very fast … [and] cultivate the land." Moreover, he explained that when people "misuse the land," "sell their houses silently, illegally," relocate to another area and thus also use other plots, they can be moved to a specific location as a "punishment."[26]

Contrary to this political approach of settling people from the same ethnic groups in a given area, local conditions in Kyaka II reveal that those from various countries and ethnic backgrounds are actually found living together. A young man stressed that it is the imposed refugee label that ultimately brings people together within the camp:

> We have a close community. We actually have many tribes in Congo, but here they are mixed together. But one thing that brings us together is the word "refugee." Because when you are called refugee and you meet another fellow refugee, if you want [to] or not, you have to love them. Just like that. We have to take [them] as [a] fellow refugee. So that word "refugee" is making us come together. And actually, we have many religions here,

26 Authority figure, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

> and all of them go to church. There is no fighting. We even have community meetings where we meet as community members, and we agree about things.[27]

The highly diverse social composition in Kyaka II was discussed time and again. Although interlocutors' prevailing theme was refugees' collective strategies for handling camp life, challenges and tensions can also arise.[28] Correspondingly, another young man also noted how,

> Reaching here, you find that they put the people who are not from the same area in the same village. So there are many different tribes and languages. Then reaching there, you find that they are from Kinyarwanda tribe and the language he or she is speaking is totally different from yours. And you cannot understand [or] speak it. And you find that also the culture is totally different. So if you feel uncomfortable there, you find your people in another place. You follow them and build a shelter there and feel comfortable.[29]

Such issues complicate adjustment to life in the camp, particularly when language barriers prevent communication with neighbours and hinder access to vital information. "Finding your people," as the man described, becomes key, helping individuals familiarize themselves with the site, settle, and build lives. Contrary to the imposed land allocation, this results in informal mobilities and movements within Kyaka II. Many interlocutors narrated when, how, and why they left certain areas, rented plots elsewhere, or gave away their allocated land to live in a more desirable *village* – as the clusters in Kyaka II are commonly called. These decisions are always rooted in individual preferences and depend on essential factors (e.g., the availability of new housing and financial resources for moving), but social connections and collective support that people self-organize are the main drivers.

In light of the prevalent livelihood challenges, collective socioeconomic strategies are crucial, and respective considerations often

27 Men from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.

28 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue 16 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

29 Man from DR Congo, discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II.

influence decisions to move to certain areas. In Kyaka II, Bukere is often a favoured destination because of its well-connected small businesses and developed commercial centres (see chapter 6).[30] Relocating is frequently facilitated by those living there already, who thus become points of access – either by renting houses, making referrals, or sharing vital information. Many others want to relocate to and live in the so-called villages where people from their region of origin settled,[31] or where their social support systems like friends are located, to manage everyday life together.[32] Especially women heading single-parent households with children prioritize such moves to assist each other with child care, provide emotional support, and help navigate daily challenges. This social self-organization is not limited to bonds with people sharing the same origin. A woman from Rwanda explained how she is part of a social network with women from diverse regions and countries with whom she feels comfortable: "My friends are there and we can chat about life and our sufferings. We can share our experience. Sometimes we can say, 'Let's try to build a group of collecting [harvest].' We tried but we have failed because of lack of money. But we can chat."[33] Although the camp structures are a constant reminder of control and restriction for the people who feel that "here you cannot plan; when you are a refugee you feel like a visitor,"[34] they challenge the imposed camp governance with these practices in everyday life.

Such strategic decisions and mobilities also occur among refugees in Kampala. The harsh camp conditions and hope for better economic opportunities are among the primary reasons people *move* to the city. Yet, they also experience diverse challenges in Kampala, and their decisions to *stay* in the city is largely influenced by their desire and ability to live their lives with relatively few structural restrictions in

30 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; discussion with three women and two men, 6 December, Kyaka II; woman from Burundi, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2016, Kyaka II.

31 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from Burundi, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, discussion, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.

32 E.g., discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II.

33 Women from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

34 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.

the city – contrary to the camp conditions – and, importantly, to remain within their strong self-organized support systems that shape their everyday circumstances (see also Boer 2015; Lyytinen 2017; Anyanzu and de Wet-Billings 2022). People of the same nationality and ethnic affiliation tend to live close to each other in the same or nearby neighbourhoods in Kampala. For example, people from Burundi and DR Congo live particularly in Makidye Division and in the areas of Nsambya, Katwe, Masajja, and Najjanakumbi. People from Somalia primarily settle in Kisenyi, Kasaato, Kakajo, Mengo Hill, and Kiwa.

Interlocutors frequently told of having chosen specific areas in Kampala for living due to the social surrounding, resonating with insights from those in the camp. The close proximity to each other provides them with feelings of comfort and familiarity, support in times of need, and a sense of belonging. Interlocutors from Somalia, for instance, noted living in Kisenyi because "there are lots of Somali friends, you can have someone to help with the kids,"[35] people can "easily socialize,"[36] children would see "fellow Somalis in a school,"[37] and "I feel comfortable because it's familiar and I know the people."[38] While people from Somalia addressed such social bonds particularly often, these were certainly not limited to them. Interlocutors from DR Congo also reflected on the value of social collectives. One woman described in great depth the importance of living near others in one area as it made her feel safe; people would alert each other in case of sudden problems and come to the rescue since they speak the same language.[39] Others referred to family relations, noting that they lived in "Katwe, where we rent with my auntie, uncle, and my other cousins";[40] alternatively, they wanted to live near friends.[41]

We can see here that mobilities are thus embedded in social systems (see also Schmidt 2023). This does not end with relocation; on the contrary, mobilities seem to be crucial for many people we spoke with. For instance, young Congolese interlocutors described that they

35 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kampala.
36 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kampala.
37 Man from Somalia, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kampala.
38 Man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
39 Woman from DR Congo, focus group discussion, 14 November 2016, Kampala.
40 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala.
41 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.

regularly travel to Kampala to visit friends, find temporary work, or buy goods such as chitenge (traditional fabrics) and take them back to Kyaka II for trade. For that, people go to Kampala for days and even months on end.[42] The job search is facilitated fundamentally by social networks – not only concerning employment per se but also by way of, for example, providing shelter and contacts.

With these travels, individuals challenge the imposed immobility, regulations, and restrictions of government and aid organizations in camps like Kyaka II and create diverse kinds of permeability for the trade in goods, socializing, or school attendance, despite camps' physical remoteness (e.g., Werker 2007, 467–73; Opondo and Rinelli 2015; Krause 2016c, 208–9; Omata 2017a; Vancluysen 2022). Such mobilities are instrumental for developing, drawing on, using, and sharing self-organized support, and mobilities' inherent connections with self-organized social systems relationally tie people and locations together – linking people's lives in the camp and the city. Instead of a unidimensional logic according to which they choose – or are forced – to live and work in one site, mobilities show greater dynamics between the camp and the city. Refugees interweave sites and social systems with each other through their social, cultural, political, religious, economic, and other practices – as a de-territorialized part of self-organization.

Self-Organizing Social Spaces in the Camp and the City

The relationship of refugees' mobilities, produced proximity, and social embeddedness is reciprocal, each one influencing the other. Central to this research is that individuals thereby self-organize social support, which becomes accessible via mobile practices as part of their everyday interactions. This starts with growing markers of identification in certain areas. For instance, some neighbourhoods have become known by the origins of their inhabitants. The cluster in Kyaka II formally called "Mukondo C," for example, is informally known as "Ishasha," as most of its residents come from the place of that name in DR Congo.[43] Moreover, Kisenyi in Kampala is also

42 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.

43 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.

known as the "little Mogadishu of Kampala" because many people from Somalia live there, and have for some years now.[44]

By their relocations and travels, they create social links via the different sites, and also shape the physical surroundings, informing the areas' material and aesthetic markers. The people thereby imprint their collective actions into the appearance of the social spaces of Kyaka II and Kampala. For example, when walking through the camp, some so-called villages displayed material signs of a shared identity. During a transect walk in which we discussed forms of architecture, interlocutors pointed out the different ways to construct houses as directly linked to the related traditions in their owners' regions of origin. In Mukondo C, for example, people were building square houses with grass thatched roofs, whereas the edifices in most other areas of the camp were more informed by the available materials – namely, in using primarily sticks, mud, and plastic sheets. Buliti was known as the nicest area, neatly built and decorated with a certain type of paint. It was explained that this is due to the people living here choosing to uphold traditions.[45] Yet, there are also spillover effects, as villages are not homogenous and social networks become established beyond identity markers. A woman we met during the transect walk recalled that a friend had shown her how to prepare the paint for her house, just for decoration[46] (Schmidt 2023, 186–92).

These physical markers also exist in Kampala. One can find particular supermarkets, restaurants, hair salons, clothing stores, and more in specific areas. By developing their own economic infrastructures, they are catering to others; not only are familiar goods and services consumed, but such enterprises also offer collective economic opportunities. These places are therefore a materialized aspect of people's self-organization to cope, solve problems together, and to create spaces of belonging. Interlocutors in Kampala connected social systems and notions of belonging not merely to people gathering in one area but also to their ability to share customs, knowledge, language, food, and the like. The significance of this was reflected by one young woman who, having experienced war and displacement in DR Congo, moved to Kampala to study and stayed after eventually

44 See also *Monitor* (2013).
45 Transect walk, 8 July 2017.
46 Transect walk, 8 July 2017.

completing her degree. She chose to live in an area where Congolese refugees were because "It feels safe and familiar … these are people from my home country. The language is the same, our food is same, our ways are similar, and so they are like my safety net."[47]

The visible transformation of a certain area by way of people's self-organization ultimately facilitates and encourages more people to come and join since the social ties pave the way for their social production of belonging. Individuals thus collectively have a pioneering effect as they fuse, broaden, and transform areas into social spaces (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1009). These spaces do not merely represent shared neighbourhoods or physical proximity; people also develop social support systems through shared routines and knowledges. Whether through aspects of everyday life such as washing clothes, collecting firewood, and raising children, or through concrete mechanisms of help such as peer counselling, diverse forms and networks of self-organized social support is omnipresent.[48] In Kampala, self-organized support was explained to be very common in the tight-knit Somali community, and one woman echoed the sentiments of many: "We as Somalis, we help each other. We are a Somali community. We believe in sharing because we are a brotherhood. I share whatever I have with my friend. That little is enough to go all around. We are communal. That is why we have survived so far."[49]

Yet, such self-organization is also widespread in other communities and is reflected in their everyday practices. For example, in Kyaka II, one woman from Rwanda spoke about the numerous difficulties she faced as an older single woman in the camp; besides insufficient livelihood, health problems, and insecurity in the camp, her home had become unstable and begun to deteriorate. Because the aid provided by government and humanitarian agencies was just not enough, she fell back on the self-organized support provided by the community. As her house's wall eventually nearly collapsed, it was members of her church community who stepped in, and she said, "when the wall fell, they held it."[50] Hence individuals came together to collectively support her – which was only possible because she was part of the community.

47 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
48 E.g., woman from Burundi, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from Somalia, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kampala.
49 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
50 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 16 July 2017, Kyaka II.

Exactly these safety nets materialize in refugees' self-organizing in Kyaka II and Kampala. The precarious conditions call for self-organized reciprocal support among those living in close contact, but they also proactively create spheres of comfort. This reflects self-organization not only as a practice but also as a body: The neighbourhoods, businesses, and social collectives that individuals develop together are constituted by informal self-organizations as well as formalized ones. Some interlocutors noted that the presence of formalized self-organizations even informed decisions to move to certain neighbourhoods as doing so allowed them to receive assistance in times of need and meet other people.[51]

Such support structures are furthermore created in formalized self-organizations. As explained in chapter 4, these self-organizations provide a wide range of support over the course of many years. Interlocutors repeatedly stressed that visiting the self-organizations, accessing their offers, and helping each other is part of their daily routines. One interlocutor in Kampala listed a range of refugee-led organizations: "YARID, Congolese Refugee Community Living in Uganda, Urban Refugee for Peace Development, HOCW, PPR, also People for Peace and Human Resource." He pointed out that they not only provide social spaces to meet but also "address issues related to refugees like human rights, education, development, health, empowerment of women and youth and providing service to new refugees and guiding refugees."[52] Another person explained that the traditional aid organizations had left her requests for support unanswered, while formalized self-organizations provided help: "YARID supports my child to [go to] school," she said, adding that "Bondeko Centre … provides accommodation, computer, English, and tailor training to newly arrived refugees."[53] Others mentioned going to "English classes,"[54] making friends there and seeing those "coming daily,"[55] or discussing problems as refugee-led organizations "advise them and give ideas."[56]

51 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala; man from Somalia, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from Burundi, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.
52 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
53 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
54 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
55 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
56 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

As such, both informal and formalized self-organizations are crucial social, political, educational, and economic support systems (see also Boer 2015; Lyytinen 2017; Easton-Calabria and Hakiza 2021; Diab et al. 2024; Pincock et al. 2020, 31–52). In Kyaka II, interlocutors gave special emphasis to the important roles of agricultural collectives, savings groups, and emergency collectives such as burial groups.[57] At first sight, these would seem to have a distinct focus on economic livelihood, but such self-organizations also provide social support both in times of need as well as continuously as part of people's everyday lives. As collectives to rely on, learn from, and collaborate with, the self-organizations foster a sense of belonging that extends beyond their initial economic functions. The self-organizations ultimately serve as vital social networks in which individuals find solace, exchange knowledge, and jointly navigate the challenges of their circumstances.

Everyday Self-Organization as a Source of Safety and Well-Being – But Also of Burden and Risk

The narratives displaced people shared about arriving and living in Kyaka II and Kampala illustrate how they adapt and transform their social and physical spaces jointly. Their self-organized collectives are instrumental and become sources of safety, care, well-being, and hope for the future. However, they can also pose risks, struggles, and burdens for individuals. In the following sections, we explore both the social values and challenges and show how closely these can be intertwined. By continuing to address common everyday social practices and the social embeddedness of collectives, we focus on informal self-organizations like family networks, friendship circles, and neighbourhood collectives and further reflect how formalized self-organizations connect to these informal ones and strategically seek to provide help.

57 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from Rwanda, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.

Self-Organizing Family Care – and Struggles in Family Collectives

"The important thing is that I have my family with me. I did not lose anyone. We encourage each other to take one day at a time."[58] With this statement, a man from DR Congo highlighted the great value he ascribed to family – a perception shared by many interlocutors. Their narratives point to families as key social collectives of safety, trust, help, and support for individuals in exile, aligning with research (e.g., Betancourt et al. 2015; Lokot 2018; Heilmann 2022; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2023).

While the core family is often addressed as a person's key milieu in research – and was also primarily referred to as such in our work – family systems can vary and embrace much broader social circles beyond the Western notion of the nuclear family or the heteronormative triad of father/mother/child(ren) (e.g., Hoare 2022; Balakian 2023). Familial care also transcends national borders as individuals maintain contact, provide support, and seek to reunite with relatives (e.g., Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Lim 2009; Robertson et al. 2016; Sauer et al. 2018). However, family systems can be, and often are, destabilized as a result of conflict, displacement, loss, and the new conditions encountered in exile, leading to the necessity of coping and (re)negotiation (e.g., Lim 2009; Robertson et al. 2016), which also applies to gender relations in families (e.g., Szczepaniková 2005; Sinatti 2014; Krause 2021). At times – contrary to the idea of family as a safety net – abuse in families as well as domestic and intimate-partner violence prevails or increases due not least to the difficult experience of displacement and harsh conditions in exile (e.g., Khawaja 2004; Horn 2010; Wachter et al. 2018; Krause 2020).

Familial networks are rarely acknowledged as genuine forms of refugee self-organization, despite the crucial roles they play and the diverse modes of support they provide. However, as discussed in chapter 2, it is crucial to seriously consider the lived experiences and impacts of conflict, displacement, and exile on familial and friendship circles. Against the backdrop of their experience of loss, separation, and everyday challenges, interlocutors in Kyaka II and Kampala frequently emphasized the significant value they place on their families.

58 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

Similar to the man we quoted above who stressed that he "did not lose anyone," many spoke about coping with the experience of loss but also their deep appreciation for having their families. As such, many also described their intense efforts to self-organize: maintaining existing ties, forging new ones, and establishing support systems within families to sustain a sense of belonging.

Such deliberate actions indicate refugees' relational agency as they actively navigate adversity, (re)construct relationships, and create social structures to support and manage life in exile. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 982, 5) also recognize the relevance of families, as even the mundane practice of organizing one's social environment involves an agentic orientation toward what is known, what is possible, and what is desired. In his reflections about relational agency, Burkitt (2016) further addresses the social connectedness within families, acknowledging how individuals' actions and thoughts are often influenced by relationships and oriented toward others. The significance of familial practices as an exercise of agency on the part of displaced people is highlighted by Kallio (2019), who illustrates how familial intergenerational relationships – including both supportive and conflicted ones – shape individuals' experiences and practices of agency in the often precarious conditions of exile. In line with that, we understand familial practices as agency and families as a fundamental form of agentic self-organization.

In Kyaka II and Kampala, interlocutors placed particular emphasis on the crucial meanings of families in everyday life and the importance of caring for children's well-being. While women and men alike spoke of familial responsibilities, their ascribed roles differ in heterosexual relations. Across different cultural backgrounds, interlocutors similarly described patriarchal gender relations in a heterosexual system as the norm, with men primarily responsible for decision making and breadwinning and women for child-rearing and household tasks.[59] LGBTQ+ refugees also addressed these structures as the norm, but they establish their own familial systems.[60] In spite of these

59 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 December 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 18 December 2016, Kampala; man from Burundi, dialogue, 22 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.

60 Anonymous. As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

practices, lived experiences of conflict and displacement, harsh economic conditions in exile, and extensive limitations imposed on refugees affect and potentially disrupt such family relations with clear role allocations. Several conversation partners said they cared for their children on their own, having lost their partners in conflict or separated in exile.[61] In families with two parents, both adults often have to work to generate income and support families, but interlocutors repeatedly stressed that women carry additional obligations as their *traditionally* ascribed roles remain unchanged.[62] The responsibilities they felt for families and children not only provide a source of strength for moving forward but can also become a source of worry, burden, or even risk.

FAMILY CARE – AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Interlocutors described their care of family members, particularly children, as a motivation to secure and improve living conditions and livelihoods. They highlighted that they want to, and must, do as much as they possibly can to support their families. One woman from DR Congo stressed, "When you are the mother, you have to find ways because you brought these children on Earth,"[63] while another underscored, "I must help if my family is to survive as refugees."[64] This reference to survival points to the multi-faceted difficulties displaced people encounter, which they have to navigate – not just to cope with challenges but especially also to manage and organize care for their families and children. This requires individuals to self-organize, and potentially also reorganize, family relations and daily routines, which is not a one-time undertaking but a recurring process of adapting to and handling ongoing and emerging issues.

For many, self-organizing familial care and life in exile entail seeking and adjusting livelihood strategies. Among the interlocutors was a single woman from Somalia who had relocated and adjusted her daily routine by running a small business in Kampala. Doing so had enabled her to balance her time and fund her children's education:

61 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 12 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 June 2020, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.
62 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.
63 Woman from DR Congo dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.
64 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

Her eldest son was finishing university, and her younger son was in school.[65] Life remained difficult for her and her children, though. The continuous struggle was also emphasized by a single woman from DR Congo who had been in Kampala for eight years when we met and who noted, "I live on moving every day to get where I can [find] someone who will allow me to wash their clothes and give me [a] little money that I will buy food [with] for my children. And that has been my daily work that I do to get food." However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, her movements were restricted by lockdowns, and she struggled to find work "because everyone is at home"; she thus had to look for alternatives.[66] In Kyaka II, although farming is promoted as the key livelihood strategy, interlocutors repeatedly lamented being unable to cater to their families' essential needs.[67] For some, this necessitates a fundamental reorganization of familial support, including cases where children have to work too. One man narrated how his family's "land was cut," resulting in a plot that was just not enough to feed a family of twelve, let alone afford school fees. "They go and work for others and they can get some money or a bunch of matooke and we can eat," he said. "That's how we survive."[68] Several interlocutors noted children's occasional or permanent work,[69] but many others outlined how they seek to establish additional economic strategies to avoid this (see chapter 6).

In light of the challenging conditions, care responsibilities can become overwhelming, though. Women, and especially single mothers, frequently stressed how much they worry about not being able to care for their children, secure their needs, offer access to education, keep them safe, and ensure their well-being[70] (see also Hillary and Braak 2022). One woman who cared for her five children alone in Kyaka II stressed that the amount of food she received was not enough to

65 Women from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
66 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 June 2020, Kampala.
67 E.g., discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, discussion with two women and two men, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II; discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.
68 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
69 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
70 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kampala.

survive on. "My children are starving," she said. Although her neighbourhood collective helped, the conditions prevailed and she repeatedly said, "[it] worries me so much."[71] Finding safe housing was particularly difficult for larger families, and several women described experiences where landlords unexpectedly raised rents or demanded "sexual favours" in exchange for renting them a property.[72] One single mother recounted the pressure she received from her landlord during the pandemic. Her income decreased and she struggled to pay the full rent, but she promised him that "I will look for the money." Yet, he threatened to "confiscate all what I have inside the house and chase me away. He said that in front of my children."[73] The constant worries about managing the situation and keeping her children safe became very burdensome.

Men also expressed deep concerns about not being able to care for families and children – but they primarily related this to failing to live up to their understanding of manhood and the duties they associated with being a man. For example, a man who fled the war in DR Congo with his wife and seven children noted that, though he had access to a stable livelihood there through house construction, he now faced great economic hardships in Kampala. He worried about "not having money for food" and about his children being unable to go to school. "When they ask why they can't attend school, as a father that's a hard question to answer," he said, reflecting the economic responsibility he ascribed to fatherhood and manhood. "I feel overwhelmed," he finally noted.[74] Others stressed similar perspectives, including a young man from DR Congo who shared the difficulties he had encountered earning income: "I feel bad. How will I cater for a family one day?"[75]

The harsh conditions in exile not only create challenges in fulfilling notions of manhood, and parenthood more broadly, but also contribute to tensions in families, which often escalate to domestic and intimate-partner violence in Kampala and Kyaka II. One woman's explanation of this violence stands out: "The problems at home are

71 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 09 December 2016, Kyaka II.
72 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 January 2017, Kampala; man from South Sudan, dialogue, 16 March 2017, Kampala.
73 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2020, Kampala.
74 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
75 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.

mostly related to poverty. The wife and the husband can fight because they don't have what [they need] to give children, or the woman doesn't have a dress and the husband is going to use the money for alcohol."[76] This account is echoed by many – mainly women, but also some men – in Kampala and Kyaka II.[77]

An elderly woman recalled how her late husband mistreated her, "beating me day and night."[78] Other women said that during fights over resources, husbands assaulted them "until I fainted,"[79] "broke all my front teeth,"[80] or "forced me to have sex" against their will.[81] In Kyaka II, this violence further intensifies "seasonally" during harvest.[82] For instance, one woman from DR Congo rued, "I go and cultivate [both my own land and, occasionally, that of others], and my husband sells the harvest to go and drink alcohol." Their income was thus insufficient to cover expenses, including their children's education; "they have been at home for two months without going to school." The man's drinking often leads to violence, "beating" her and their children. To protect themselves, they "sleep outside or at a friend's house."[83]

The prevalence and intensity of violence, including physical and sexual assault as well as emotional, psychological, and structural oppression via humiliation, confinement, and denial of resources, is also reflected in other studies on refugees in Uganda (e.g., Henry et al. 2013; Kwiringira et al. 2018; Naggujja et al. 2014; Krause 2021, 90–145; Mwenyango 2023) and worldwide (e.g., Khawaja 2004; Carlson 2005; Freedman 2016; Horn 2010; Wachter et al. 2018).

76 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.

77 E.g., discussion with five women, 8 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

78 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

79 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

80 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

81 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.

82 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

83 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.

This violence starkly contrasts with the notion of families as sources of trust, care, and stability. It reflects not merely the effects of limited livelihoods or frustration, but also deeper issues of patriarchal gender hierarchies, where power lies with "big men," as an interlocutor stated.[84] Despite the prevalence of such violence, the majority of the men in our research were not perpetrators; some instead actively opposed and worked against it.[85] Some formalized self-organizations also set out to provide protection for those affected by gender-based violence. REAL is a core example here, linking protection with economic and social services (see chapter 4).

Whether and to what extent such tensions and violence occurs in families among LGBTQ+ refugees in Uganda could not be thoroughly explored due to the highly discriminatory political climate (on violence and discrimination more broadly, see Nyanzi 2013; McQuaid 2020). Yet, interlocutors did express deep concerns for, as well as the great value they place on, their own families.[86] Their experiences differ from those of heterosexual individuals, however. They tried to conceal their sexual orientation and gender identity from their biological families for years, and some saw no other way of avoiding suspicion than to enter into a heterosexual relationship. Yet, when revealed, they similarly shared how they faced threats, violence, and expulsion from biological family and community members. These experiences deeply affected them, but did not extinguish their longing for familial connections. Some noted holding on to good memories and missing their parents, siblings, and extended family circles, aware that the chances for being accepted or peacefully reuniting with their biological families are slim. One interlocutor, who continues to hide their sexual orientation from their family "because I fear that I put them at risk," was imprisoned and subjected to violence in their country of origin before escaping. They spoke about "suffering from severe depression," regularly consuming alcohol, and sometimes struggling to leave the house. Yet, they said, "You fall down, you get up, you fall down, you get up." While they maintain contact with their family

84 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.

85 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 January 2017, Kampala; man from Burundi, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala.

86 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

via phone and WhatsApp, which gives some comfort, they worry that they may never meet again.[87]

In Uganda, interlocutors have formed their own families. They occur in intimate partnerships between couples and also in close social systems to which interlocutors ascribe familial meanings. They serve care, safety, and trust, provide emotional and material backing, and set roles for individuals. Due to the widespread discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in Uganda, their primary concerns for their family members are related to safety and security. Yet, their familial care extends to all aspects of everyday life, including ensuring sufficient income to sustain livelihoods, securing safe housing, and assisting each other in cases of illness. With HIV still prevalent in Uganda and LGBTQ+ individuals facing discrimination at health facilities, such care is fundamental for the well-being of individuals, and particularly ill family members.

SEPARATED FAMILY MEMBERS, NEW FAMILY TIES, AND WORRIES FOR LOST FAMILY MEMBERS

That familial collectives do not occur naturally but instead represent core forms of social self-organization is evident in interlocutors' experiences related to conflict and displacement. Many have experienced violence in their countries of origin and during flight, been separated from their families, and witnessed relatives being abducted or murdered. Conflict and displacement thus disrupt familial relations. Psychological studies highlight the traumatizing experiences of such intensive violence, armed conflict, human loss, and pervasive uncertainty (for overviews, see Bogic et al. 2015; Vossoughi et al. 2018), but they also reveal the importance of familial ties, support, and care for coping (e.g., Khawaja et al. 2008; Betancourt et al. 2015; Arenliu et al. 2020). This is evident in our research, and when interlocutors spoke about *their* children, they were not always referring to biological ones. Many have taken in children of relatives, friends, and acquaintances, or children travelling alone.

This was the case for one woman from DR Congo. During the war, she had lost most of her family members. She said that rebels came, abducted her husband, then "later came back and picked up my children" after raping her. "I was unconscious, but some neighbour came in after and took [me] to the clinic." She recalled that after a couple of days' recovery, her neighbour advised her to flee the country.

87 Anonymous.

"I didn't want to leave without my children, but she [the neighbour] told me not [to] be stupid, because they [would] probably come back for me, and I was not even sure that my children were still alive." The woman explained how difficult the decision was, but how she eventually did leave for Kampala. After some time, she learned from the pastor in her church that her brother, his wife, and their children were still alive and had fled to Rwanda. Due to serious health problems, they sent their children to her. "The church members helped us a lot, even with the finances for us to take care of ourselves," she said.[88] In the course of our dialogue, she spoke about them as *my* children – something that occurred in other conversations too.[89]

Such fostering of children and *othermothering* shows how family, kinship, and familial care are not simply defined in the Eurocentric sense of nuclear families but occur in various forms (Gale 2006; Onuora 2015; Shoboiki 2019; Balakian 2023; on othermothering, see also Collins 1990; Davis-Sowers 2012). Jaji (2025) reveals in her research about proxy mothers in Zimbabwe that kinship structures inherently involve the fostering of children along gender lines. While these structures vary culturally, our research demonstrates, among other things, how widespread child fostering is and how it extends beyond prior kinship relations as individuals take in children who flee alone. Moreover, our research indicates how this essentially requires and reflects social self-organizing. In addition to familial self-organizing, social support systems in which familial structures are integrated serve a crucial role. The woman's narrative reveals the support from the church community that assisted her and the children, showing how diverse self-organized collectives intertwine and shape everyday life in exile. Although the practice of fostering children is also actively supported and encouraged by the aid organizations in Kyaka II, the serious challenges faced by parents in the refugee regime – as particularly evident in resettlement procedures – are largely neglected. In a meeting for foster parents, two attendees described their dilemma as they were selected for the resettlement while their foster children were excluded – leaving them with the choice of either pursuing this durable solution for themselves at the price of abandoning their children or remaining in Uganda as a family unit.

88 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala.

89 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.

Moreover, these support structures sometimes fail or are absent. Children fleeing alone – or unaccompanied minors, as they are often described in research and politics – face particular difficulties in exile all over the world (e.g., Clark-Kazak 2010a; Fazel et al. 2012; Grayson 2017; Meda 2017; Lems et al. 2019; Denkowski and Krause 2024). This includes situations where individuals' child fostering and sheltering, along with the new family collectives, become sources of risk, neglect, and exploitation for children. This was evident in the story that one young woman from DR Congo shared with us. We met her in the streets of Kampala, as she was on her way to buy fruit for the woman she lived with. As we started talking, she said that her parents had been abducted in DR Congo and so she was forced to flee with her older brother. Having reached Uganda, she was first homeless and then started to live with a woman, her husband, and two young children who had also fled DR Congo. She called the social collective her "family" and the woman her "auntie." This is quite common, but her tone turned sad as the young woman spoke about the conditions she and her brother were living in. She explained that "auntie" and the "family" had a big house with a garden. Yet, the young woman and her brother were living in what sounded like shed-like provisional accommodation behind the house, with no beds to sleep in and no bathroom to use. In return for sheltering them, "auntie" made her work seven days a week. She was also made to run errands in the evening: "My auntie always sends me out after nightfall to buy her airtime [i.e., a phone card] and fruit. There are guys always lounging around. I am scared that one day they will do something bad to me." Yet, she said that they barely had enough to eat, let alone sanitary pads, clothes, access to education or health care, and that her brother was looking for casual work so "we can buy food. If he fails, we go without food. My auntie refuses to provide."[90]

While we did not come across other such cases during our research, that does not mean they do not exist. As we met this young woman only by chance, there are likely other individuals in similar situations who remain hard to reach – including for refugees' informal and formalized self-organizations or aid organizations that can potentially provide protection. Although interlocutors primarily spoke about taking in children and offering safe spaces, they also addressed the wide range of issues children and youth face in Kyaka II and Kampala,

90 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

such as insecurity, lack of stable support structures, and uncertainty.[91] Members of the refugee youth-led organization Rendezvous Youth Group in Kampala similarly discussed these issues and set out to provide support and protection (more below).[92] This corresponds with the research by Oriel Kagan and Shanee (2024), who find that the fostering of unaccompanied children by refugee families is widespread in Uganda, but lack of formalization, support, and supervision leaves the children vulnerable. Despite the involvement of aid agencies and local communities, the absence of adequate institutional support, coupled with the economic crises exacerbated by COVID-19, has resulted in exploitative and abusive fostering practices.

In light of the diverse risks children face in Kyaka II, the Hodari Foundation strategically aims to offer help for children without such stable social and familial support. Below, the founder, Janvier Hafasha, shares information about the organization's mission and work. We are very grateful to him for allowing us to include it here. He explained that the word *hodari* is Swahili and means to live strong and to have courage in times of hardship – which immediately translates into the programs that the foundation carries out for children at risk. The foundation seeks to promote and defend the rights and well-being of children. It established a regular feeding program for children in the camp to ensure their physical well-being, in addition to setting up a safe space for them to come together, interact, speak, and play with each other.

REFLECTIONS ON THE HODARI FOUNDATION

Janvier Hafasha

I am Janvier Hafasha, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the founder of Hodari Foundation.

I established the foundation in 2019 to support my community in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement. It all started when I was working

91 E.g., woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2017, Kampala; discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II; discussion with three young women and three young men, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

92 Anonymous.

as a community-based facilitator with Humanity & Inclusion (formerly, Handicap International). I got an opportunity to know more about what gaps and challenges the people are facing within the community here in Kyaka II. When I had a community session for psychosocial counselling of women, there was a woman who had a young baby two weeks old and the baby was crying so much. The woman later told me that this was not her baby. Their mother had passed away one week ago and the baby was crying because there was no milk. She had tried to get assistance from agencies but nothing worked. I felt bad because there is always some emergency support, especially for kids so young.

This was the moment when I decided to help. I supported her in receiving milk for the baby and also decided to do more. I realized that there are so many children facing challenges and so I spoke with my fellow refugees like Esther Niyonsaba, Stellah Nikuze and Gentille Asifiwe, who picked the interest to join me and that was the birth of the organization. Our aim is to promote the wellbeing of children and safeguard the rights of those from diverse social backgrounds.

I registered Hodari Foundation in 2020. "Hodari" is Swahili and means to be strong. It is a refugee-led nonprofit organisation. Our vision and mission are clear. Hodari Foundation works to promote and defend the rights and well-being of all individuals, regardless of their background, by fostering a culture of inclusion and equality. Our work is focused on children from birth to seventeen years old such as disabled children, orphans, unaccompanied minors, albinos, among others, but we also support child mothers, SGBV survivors and elders aged seventy years and above.

Hodari Foundation is at the forefront of restoring hope among refugees. We started with a feeding programme and extended our work over time. Many children in Kyaka II are orphans and malnourished or face risks and many do not have enough food; those with food, their diet is not balanced which leads to deficiency diseases such as kwashiorkor, anemia, marasmus etc. We come together to provide more than 125 children with meals and discipline programming. This is with the goal of ensuring that more children go to school nourished, leading to better growth and development. On a weekly basis, Hodari Foundation supports children with meals.

The programme has great impact in the community and helps children to come together in the community. Due to our programme, we

have noted higher school attendance and participation in activities in Kyaka II. Moreover, the children find space to enjoy themselves, meet other children and they can talk to us in case they need help.

We also help the community. For example, over Christmas all aid agencies leave Kyaka II. We do not, and the team of Hodari Foundation made a programme called the Compassion Day in 2022, which was targeting elders who are eighty years or older and the children. On Christmas Day, we fed more than 300 people. It is the community that helps each other.

Over time, Hodari Foundation has included additional programmes for women's empowerment and sustainable income-generation. On the one hand, the programme called "She is Empowered" provides life skills and vocational training to refugee girls and women. By offering training and entrepreneurial skills, this programme works to support young women in becoming confident and self-reliant. On the other hand, the programme called "permaculture for sustainable food and income" focuses on agriculture. We provide training, and the programme is a source of income for our organization. We are led by the ethics of permaculture (earthcare, peoplecare and fair-share) and plan to incorporate more projects such as reforestation and soil-erosion prevention in the future.

Hodari Foundation, being a refugee-led organization, experiences challenges of the high expectations and great needs from the refugees in Kyaka II that are not easily met due to limited resources. The directors of Hodari Foundation would reach the thousands of people who require our support if we got an opportunity to cooperate with other refugee-led organizations and with donors that are interested in supporting children and girls at risk.

Generously contributed on 12 February 2023

Setting up such safe spaces for children as Hodari Foundation does is a key example of the social safety net that refugees self-organize and establish for and with each other.

Finally, linked to the nexus of conflict, displacement, and family dynamics are concerns about the well-being of relatives who stayed behind – whether consciously or involuntarily. Interlocutors frequently expressed their anxieties about family members who did not yet want

to leave, had been abducted, or had gone missing, and they also explained their endeavours to find them. Their social chains serve as continuous communication links with individuals in their regions of origin, extending to seeking and sharing updates about relatives' locations, conditions, and well-being. For instance, one conversation partner described how he reunited with his wife after fleeing; as she arrived in Uganda, other people informed her, "Your husband is in Kyaka [II]." Upon receiving that information, she looked for him, and they eventually reunited – through the sharing of situated knowledges among those who are displaced.

However, many interlocutors were unable to locate their relatives despite extensive efforts, which made it impossible for them to self-organize their familial circle. Many spoke about the experiences of violence that caused their separation and continue to affect many. A young woman from DR Congo explained how she used to live with her sister and brother-in-law. One day, rebels came looking for him. "They said if we cry, they will kill us." She had the chance to leave, and did, but added that she did not know if her sister or her family were alive and well. "I haven't heard from them since then."[93] Another woman from DR Congo shared that rebels killed her parents and abused her. They "kidnapped and raped me in the bush." When they sent her to collect firewood, "I had a chance to escape," but she still did not know where her siblings were.[94]

Refugees from DR Congo especially shared such experiences of widespread violence during the conflict and worries about family members being abducted, forcefully recruited as soldiers, or murdered by the warring parties. Yet, some interlocutors from Burundi, Rwanda, and Somalia expressed similar concerns about family members unable to leave and of whose whereabouts and well-being they were unaware. One woman who had left Somalia due to Al-Shabaab's terrorist attacks said that she was only able to flee with two of her children. Time and again she spoke of the children who had remained behind in Somalia, noting how much she missed and worried about them.[95] Another young man noted that he faced political persecution in Somalia and fled abruptly, saying, "I left all family in Somalia and I don't know where they are."[96]

93 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
94 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kampala.
95 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 25 November 2016, Kampala.
96 Man from Somalia, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kampala.

Several interlocutors described how their feelings oscillate between constant worry and maintaining hope. They noted feeling "like an orphan" while praying their parents are alive,[97] repeatedly expressed concerns "for the safety of my family,"[98] and shared their enduring "hope to have a reunion with my family."[99] Trying to remain hopeful and optimistic was a driving force for many, for which they frequently drew on additional social collectives. Religious self-organization was particularly often addressed in this context, interlocutors stressing the relevance of mutual support in coping with their tragedies by praying together as well as providing material support when needed (see also below on the role of shared belief). In line with that, many stressed how they maintained hope of reuniting with relatives,[100] and a woman from DR Congo explained accordingly, "there's nothing I can do apart from waiting and praying to God."[101]

Despite being rooted in the love they have for family members, their fears for kin, maintained over the long term, can affect a person's well-being greatly. Psychological studies indicate how the uncertainty about loved ones can contribute to mental distress and disorders (Miller et al. 2018; Jones 2020; Renner et al. 2021). As Boss argues concerning ambiguous loss, "[w]ith no official verification of death, no possibility of closure, and no rituals for support, there is no resolution of grief" (2010, 137; see also Boss 1999). While part and parcel of life, this shows just how difficult familial situations and self-organization can be for people in exile.

Self-Organized Collectives as Safety Nets – and a Source of Risk

Individuals in Kyaka II and Kampala also self-organize to prevent dangers and help each other after incidents occur. It is often the people's closest counterparts – in terms of both geographical proximity and social connections – who provide not just material support but safety and protection. Close friends and social groups often form key support networks that can even resemble family-like ties (see also Hoare 2022;

97 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 January 2017, Kampala.
98 Man from Somalia, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kampala.
99 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala.
100 E.g., woman from Somalia, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
101 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 June 2016, Kyaka II.

Mortensen 2019; Rodgers 2010). This is evident in the reflections of Paul*, shared at the beginning of this chapter, who met five other young men after arriving in Kampala and described their close friendship as living "in a group."[102] However, such support is sometimes not enough, and refugees' formalized self-organizations set out to provide support. This includes offering spaces for peer counselling for individuals to regain or remain hopeful. Faith, and especially practising faith together, is also key for their well-being and safety.

CLOSE SOCIAL CIRCLES AND FRIENDS AS SOURCES OF SUPPORT AND PROTECTION – BUT ALSO OF RISK

Closeness among friends does not occur by chance but rather stems from the conscious efforts of members of self-organized collectives. Interlocutors frequently underlined the strong value they ascribe to their friends; they talk and listen to each other;[103] share vital information;[104] socialize and have fun together;[105] help each other in times of need – for instance, by giving shelter, caring for children, and providing financial assistance;[106] and seek to live close to each other for support.[107] For example, one woman from DR Congo who was attacked by a stranger in Kampala said that her cries for help went unanswered. Recalling what happened next, she noted, "I have some friends I talked to after, and they listened to me." Later, she explained that her "network of friends" would "encourage" her in such difficult

102 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
103 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II; discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.
104 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala; man from Rwanda, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.
105 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kampala.
106 E.g., woman from Somalia, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2016, Kyaka II.
107 E.g., man from Somalia, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala; man from Burundi, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.

times.[108] Another woman described how she began selling handmade jewelry on the streets of Kampala, remarking, "my friends help me; it's good to move with someone."[109] Similarly, a woman from Somalia recalled the struggles she encountered when starting her business and credited her friends for providing the initial capital: "If it weren't for my friends, I don't know where I would be."[110]

Refugees' preventive and reactive protection strategies can be so commonplace that they might not be immediately noticeable, and they may even appear counterproductive by potentially increasing risks; they nonetheless reflect the support individuals receive in their everyday lives. One example can be seen in the reluctance of survivors of domestic and intimate-partner violence to report such abuse. Although this might lead to prolonged threats, interlocutors revealed their complex motives for deciding to forgo seeking formal redress: Some refrain from reporting due to fear of exclusion from or increased violence in family collectives, or stigmatization in communities, while others actively seek improvements by enlisting elders, community, or religious leaders to resolve tensions, or use silence as a protection strategy.[111] Though deeply rooted in individual decisions and practices, these actions underscore the strong influence of social expectations and support. In each case, women referred to the roles of their friends and close social collectives and noted benefiting from sharing experiences, sleeping outside for collective protection, and also practising silence together.

That such silence is not an apparent non-action, but rather a conscious strategy employed by individuals and collectives, is also reflected in research (e.g., Ghorashi 2007; Erdener 2017; Parpart and Parashar 2019). Silence might seem to point to a way to repress experiences and feelings and "forget the pain," as an elderly woman said.[112] While this is true for some interlocutors, most actively deal with, verbalize, and share their experiences with others in order to remain hopeful

108 Woman from DR Congo, Dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
109 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
110 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala.
111 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala; discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
112 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

and be able to move forward – but they decide when and how to do so. Insights shared by conversation partners correspond with the research of Thomson (2013), who addresses how young displaced women from Somalia living in Nairobi, Kenya, form problem-solving networks and use "muted voices" and silence as a strategic form of action. In Kampala and Kyaka II, women also self-organize networks in which they offer and receive social protection and support, create time to speak with each other, but also be silent together, producing a sphere of familiarity and belonging. In addition, they use voice and silence strategically toward others by deciding when they speak up against violence and oppression and when they keep quiet to foster individual and mutual protection.[113]

Similar strategies of silence represent instances of conscious avoidance aimed at obviating or preventing risks. Regardless of their gender identities and sexual orientations, many interlocutors said that they strategically avoid leaving the house after dark; if they must, they try to be quick. People recounted how "we all avoid moving at night,"[114] generally forego "unnecessary movements,"[115] and seek to teach their children and safeguard their families too. "I also make sure my children are home by nightfall," explained one interlocutor.[116] While avoiding movement after dark seems to be an individual practice to ensure one's safety, it is so widely used and based on shared knowledge that it ultimately represents a collective one too. Moreover, others use avoidance as a protection strategy due to the continued fear of political persecution by actors in their countries of origin. Interlocutors from Burundi and to some extent Rwanda expressed worries about spies, and therefore kept to close family and social circles alone and strategically avoided camps, choosing to live in big cities like Kampala. One man noted that due to his "wife's political position in Burundi, it was not safe for us" as "some of the refugees could be government spies looking out for people like us." For this reason, they decided to move to the city.[117] Living in larger cities helps them blend in and

113 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 February 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from Burundi, dialogue, 23 November 2016; Kyaka II.
114 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
115 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
116 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kampala.
117 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016 Kampala.

remain unnoticed, as a woman from Burundi shared: "[W]e are hiding. No one can know where we are."[118] For some, this means continuously moving in the city: "We keep relocating so our family isn't found,"[119] as one man explained. Such movements rely on self-organized support structures as individuals and families find shelter and protection from trusted friends.

The collective approach to protection is particularly evident in individuals' everyday practices of moving together to ensure their safety. Whether when searching for firewood, walking to school, moving to and working on farmland, or being at the market together, these collective practices were an integral part of many people's everyday lives. This was also stressed by a man from Burundi, who first said, "I do move in groups due to fear of being beaten," and added that his "sister is not allowed to leave home alone." He further explained, "men and women do protect themselves the same. We all move in groups, we all move with our identification papers, and we live in neighbourhoods where we have friends and relatives in case of an emergency; they can all come in to help."[120]

However, concerns about trust and establishing enduring friendships also surfaced. Interlocutors shared experiences of betrayal and theft by people they initially perceived to be friends. One woman narrated how a friend betrayed her in Kampala. After suffering horrific violence and losing family members in DR Congo, she said she eventually started to enjoy life in exile; she ran a shop, felt "safe," and found Ugandans who "treat me well." Due to her personal history, building trust took time, but her friends gradually became invaluable to her. Yet, she recalled how she met a woman who was from the same area in DR Congo, and they became friends, until she exploited and betrayed her: "One night, she requested me to help her … She got a copy of my key and started coming in while I was away and taking away some money. Once I had left briefly and she came and opened up. My neighbours called me and said my friend comes in when I am not around and goes away with items."[121]

She reported everything to the police, who arrested her but let her go the same day without charges. The woman explained that the

118 Woman from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
119 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
120 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
121 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala.

husband of this person apologized and promised to pay her back, but then revealed, "they always bring in fake notes." This experience deeply affected her, making it difficult to trust others again. Further interlocutors also noted how such apparent friends had stolen from them, or exploited their friendship, which partly led to violent fallings-out. Facing such betrayals, some decided against reporting, saying, "we just keep quiet"[122] and "I just keep quiet and continue with my business"[123] to prevent repercussions in their communities. This was not an option for others. One man from Somalia recalled how a supposed friend who was living with him started to spread damaging rumours, which destroyed his business reputation and resulted in "stopping my work and closing my business. It has caused me suffering and made me see misery." Yet, he decided to stay in the area and eventually started a new business.[124]

The multi-faceted meanings and potential risks of friends and close social connections are also reflected in some studies. In her research about Iranians in Turkey, Koser Akcapar similarly finds that while strong social ties can be highly supportive, weaker ones between those who only first met in Turkey "could be obstructive, oppressive, and exploitative" (2010, 175), due to misinformation, lying, and even violence. Mortensen (2019) likewise examines difficulties in friendships among young Syrian men in Amman, Jordan, and emphasizes that their experiences of war, displacement, and precarity in exile contribute to them being careful and mistrusting of others. She stresses the daily negotiation of friendship: "In exile not fully knowing the other and not letting the other fully know you became necessary aspects of the daily negotiation of friendships" (Mortensen 2019, 31).

Such negotiations in, but also risks arising from, friendships are also evident in accounts of perilous group mobilization in Kampala and Kyaka II. For example, one young man from DR Congo recalled his difficulties after arrival.[125] His parents went to Burundi while he fled to Uganda with his sister and aunt, whom he described as "parent." He first lived in a camp where life "is not easy" because of the insufficient food, poverty, and overarching hardships. The lack of prospects

122 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 February 2017, Kampala.
123 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
124 Man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
125 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2017, Kampala.

made him join a group of young men he believed were his friends. They consumed drugs regularly, which also led him to start to "drink alcohol and smoke marijuana." He explained how they would "walk around at night" as there was nothing to do. However, an incident – he was reluctant to provide details, saying only that "my security was at stake" – prompted him to make radical changes: "I quit alcohol and marijuana. It was not right. I decided I had to take care of myself. I am not a born-again Christian, but I decided to stop taking alcohol and drugs just on my own. I felt I had a responsibility to myself. I don't go to bars anymore. I had needs, and I thought, I have to use my brain. I now can buy food, slippers if I need them. I can support myself."[126] This also involved finding a job in a hair salon in Kampala, through which he could support himself and his family. Since he did not see a future for himself in the camp and worried about being harmed by group members, he decided to move to Kampala. Sometime later, his aunt and sister joined him there.

FORMALIZED SELF-SUPPORT AND SELF-PROTECTION

While the closest social environment provides support for very personal and emotional issues, there are also more formalized types of self-organizations addressing these crucial areas of support. These frequently arise from routinized support and grow into formalized groups and organizations. Such risks were also discussed by members of the formalized self-organization Rendezvous Youth Group in Kampala,[127] which we briefly mentioned above. They had founded this group to work with and support youth and adolescents, seeking to prevent dangerous forms of mobilization. As one member explained, "Refugee youths are disoriented. After entering Uganda as refugees, the trauma they come with, combined with the hard life of the city and lack of employment, force them to indulge in drug abuse like smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. The end of it is that a lot of refugee youths would end [up] in prison and on the street. Seeing all this, we came together as a group of youth to help the refugee youth out of this challenge." Another added that "[r]efugee youths are suffering from idleness," and shared his own experiences of

126 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2017, Kampala.
127 Anonymous.

moving in dangerous circles. "My protection starts with myself. I must protect myself as much as I can. By avoiding drugs and moving late in the night. I try also to avoid idleness by trying to do something." He explained, however, that the group "has no ways of protecting any member." The group members instead "share the experiences [of risk] and we think together on how to avoid the threats. The group members advise each other on how to abide [by] the law of this country and to avoid risky places like bars and film halls." A young woman added, "[w]e help the fight [against] idleness by engaging them in many activities such as MDD [music, dance, and drama], we train them in life skills such as tailoring, and in business skills. We also do peer counselling to the group members." In response, a young man remarked, "[w]e support each other in that way, but most important [is] the psychological part of it in counseling."[128] The fact that refugees formally self-organized with this objective reveals that the dangers that young people face in Uganda are not isolated cases, but a prevalent problem.

Indeed, several formalized self-organizations focus on social-protection and risk-averting strategies for specific groups. Interlocutors referred to self-support groups convened to talk about experiences of violence, for example.[129] Social support vis-à-vis mental well-being is also a core area in the women-only self-organizations REAL and ASOFRA. Members of the latter explained how it was established "to help each other psychologically," further noting that, as "[u]rban refugees, we don't get any support from these agencies [, and] for this reason we came together in order to be united as women refugees and collaborate in many challenges. Like when one has lost a family member; we come together, we comfort each other through counselling."[130]

Such shared comfort and protection were also emphasized by a member of a cultural dance group, who highlighted that "being with others helps."[131] Through this group, members could preserve and strengthen music and dance as part of their cultural identity. This supported their physical and mental well-being, as one dance teacher explained: "You also must understand that this dancing, there is a

128 Anonymous.
129 Discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.
130 Anonymous.
131 Anonymous.

way it helps someone. When you are not dancing, your veins get blocked … When you are dancing, the veins open and the blood moves through the body smoothly."[132]

Self-organizing for protection is particularly relevant for LGBTQ+ people, who experience structural discrimination and physical violence due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and self-expression in Uganda.[133] Due to the illegalization and criminalization of same-sex relations, all LGBTQ+ people in Uganda are exposed to risks, but this is especially true for refugees due to their legal status and accompanying challenges of life in exile. Many were rejected by their families and therefore can no longer draw on those social collectives. While they form new families as well as social collectives of trust to foster protection for each other, further structures are needed.

One formalized refugee-led organization sets out to provide instrumental support. Founded in 2009, the self-organization represents a particularly vital safety net for LGBTQ+ refugees that arose out of informal social connection. It aims to offer support services and a safe space for them in Kampala and three camps around the country. We would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to the organization's Director for sharing the information behind and developments around the organization's work and allowing us to include it in the book.[134] The following reflection was initially shared in French and translated to English. The decision to include the Director's own words was made after many careful discussions with them about the risks potentially arising for them personally as well as all the members due to the visibility hereby produced. To minimize these risks, their contribution is presented in anonymized form. They emphasized the importance of shedding light on the precarious conditions LGBTQ+ refugees face and the essential role this self-organization plays in supporting them.

132 Anonymous.

133 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

134 Due to the political situation, the name of the organization and its Director have been anonymized. Instead of using a pseudonym, this individual decided to be identified by their role. Contact with the Director was maintained entirely by Ulrike Krause. For security and confidentiality reasons, no other member of the research team was in communication with them.

REFLECTIONS ON AN LGBTQ+ REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATION

The Director

As the founder and director of an LGBTI refugee-led organization, I would like to share not only how we seek to protect, support, and promote LGBTI refugees in Uganda, but also information about my own experiences, which contribute to my ongoing commitment.

FEAR IN HOME COUNTRIES AND IN EXILE

Living openly as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersex person is very difficult and hardly possible for countless people in countries all over the world. This was also my experience in DR Congo. I had to hide my sexuality, but at one point rumors started to spread. My own family and my community mobilized against me; one day in 2007, they were looking for me, threatening to torture and kill me. I was desperate, feared for my life, and had to flee to Uganda. Many people I know have had to hide their true identity for most of their lives too. They have suffered violence and persecution.

Sadly, escaping to Uganda did not guarantee safety or provide a secure environment as I had hoped. In Uganda, LGBTI people as well as sex workers are confronted with tremendous difficulties in rural and urban areas alike. Heterosexuality is often assumed to be the only acceptable orientation. Homosexuality is regarded as deviant, and any variation from cultural concepts of "normal gender" can evoke hostility and violence.

I chose to stay in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. On arrival, I met other LGBTI refugees. As we shared our experiences, it became clear to me that homophobic intolerance and violence is a massive problem for LGBTI refugees in Uganda. It is extremely horrible. People are rejected from their homes and families. Their belongings are stolen. They are beaten in the streets. They are harassed and discriminated against. We live a very difficult life.

HELPING EACH OTHER IN AND VIA OUR REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATION

listening to personal stories about intolerance, discrimination, and violence against LGBTI refugees motivated me to create the refugee

led organization, to be united, to help each other, and to be strong. I wanted to create a safe space that brings people together so that we could share our lives as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people, be safe, and learn how to protect ourselves. I shared the idea with some friends, and then founded the refugee-led organization in 2009. We started with an executive committee made up of six members. Now, in 2023, we have 274 members. Our members are refugees from different countries, including Burundi, DR Congo, Rwanda, and also Eritrea and Somalia. We now work with members in Kampala and three camps, including Kyaka II.

Although the refugee-led organization is now big, the process to get there over the past years has been exceptionally difficult. Registering it officially was very complicated and exhausting because homosexuality is a criminal offense in Uganda and the government has been persecuting LGBTI individuals and organizations since 2009. Due to the focus on members' health, it was registered as an AIDS organization.

The organization has five core objectives:

A To advocate, promote and protect the human rights principle of the LGBTI and sex worker refugee members in Uganda.
B To carry out HIV and AIDS prevention and awareness campaigns among the LGBTI and sex worker refugees in Uganda
C To respond to the challenges facing LGBTI and sex worker refugees in Uganda through psychoeducation and counseling.
D To promote vocational skills through training and sponsorships to lgbti and sex worker refugees in Uganda
E To improve the livelihood of LGBTI and sex worker refugees through economic empowerment activities and entrepreneurship skills in Uganda

In the organization, I am here to protect our members and to fight against LGBTI discrimination. LGBTI people have the right to do and be anything they want, exactly like others do too. We need to fight marginalization because we are being stereotyped. The organization offers us space in which we work together to eradicate intolerance, discrimination, and violence in the community, to create awareness and to promote equality.

Our community is at the heart of our work. We provide a vital safety net for our members. We are there for each other, talk to each other, and provide help as needed. We organize shelter, help people get access to medical care, provide security for our members, and give administrative and legal support.

We also implement income-generating initiatives. We have a computer lab where members receive training in the morning; it is then converted into an Internet café in the afternoon. We also train members in a hair and beauty salon, which operates as a commercial venture as well. These initiatives equip our members with valuable skills for their future livelihoods and also help provide the funds necessary for our organization's work.

For the future, plans are in place for opening a design studio and commencing a chicken farm. Given the many forms of stigma and discrimination that LGBTI refugees face in employment, economic empowerment is crucial for their survival and wellbeing going forward.

Providing a safe space for our members and ensuring their wellbeing will remain our priorities. Unity is our strength. There are many of us in the world, and we must fight discrimination together. Only together can we stand up to discrimination, persecution, and homophobia. This is my message to all of you who read this. Stand by us, to oppose homophobia.

Generously contributed on 8 April 2023

The insights into this important and wide-ranging work reinforces just how crucial refugees' self-organized support and protection structures are. Their work by, for, and with LGBTQ+ people is of even greater importance given the widespread risks of violence, exclusion, and discrimination to which LGBTQ+ people are exposed in Uganda. Endemic challenges prevail, and the organization and its members continue to be exposed to risks, threats, and insufficient institutional support in such areas as partnerships or funding. These circumstances are by no means limited to Uganda, however. Since traditional humanitarian protection and assistance are still often insufficient – if they are available at all – for LGBTQ+ refugees (e.g., Spijkerboer 2013; Kivilcim 2017; Camminga 2020), risks compound and self-organized

support networks gain in significance (Reda and Proudfoot 2020). Yet, research on queer people's formalized self-organizations is limited and requires significantly more attention.

Research in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya indicates that queer refugees' self-organization significantly help to navigate the challenges of exile and create spaces of safety, belonging, and support (Krause and Segadlo 2024). These collective efforts include organizing shared living arrangements, institutionalizing protection systems, and creating income-generating opportunities. Similar to the approach shared by the Director of the LGBTQ+ refugee-led organization, these networks address immediate needs as well as foster emotional and psychological well-being through peer counselling and group activities, helping individuals cope with trauma and isolation. They also contribute to the broader community in Kakuma, seeking to build peaceful relations with others through conciliatory actions and awareness-raising efforts. Despite persistent anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, allies within the camp provide material aid, protection, and encouragement and thereby strengthen hope for the future. These practices stemming from formalized self-organization exemplify agency of queer refugees in creating a sense of community and navigating structural inequalities in their daily lives in Kenya, which we similarly witnessed in Uganda.

SELF-ORGANIZING FOR PEER COUNSELLING AND SHARED BELIEF

The different formalized self-organizations noted here – including Rendezvous Youth Group, REAL, ASOFRA, the cultural dance group, and the LGBTQ+ refugee-led organization – have in common their approach to and support of peer counselling. This also applies to other self-organizations, whose representatives explained that counselling serves to create spaces in which refugees can speak about past and current experiences, cope with difficulties, and help each other to remain or become hopeful and optimistic.[135] In some cases, such counselling is conducted by trained social workers or psychologists who have also experienced displacement; in most instances, it takes the form of peer counselling in groups and thus talking with each other in a safe space. Some of the self-organizations are fairly small

135 E.g., man, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; man, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

and were established solely for peer counselling, while others are part of larger self-organizations that provide different forms of social and economic support.

Members noted how helpful this is for them. One woman who had lost her husband in Rwanda and then fled to Kampala told us about a women's group that she had joined. She primarily speaks with "women members who are older than me." She further relayed that, "[w]henever I share with them my challenges, they listen to me and counsel me … The group helps me just in counselling, telling me how to protect myself."[136] An elderly woman who fled DR Congo in 2001 shared how she first stayed in a camp and then relocated to Kampala, where still faces many challenges. She had joined a self-organization a few years prior to our dialogue: "The group protects me much through counselling. Every Friday we are together we help each other in sharing ideas … In case one member has a challenge, we bring it to the attention of other groups."[137] One man similarly highlighted, "[t]he group helps me in counselling, they encourage me to accept the situation as a reality. They counsel me as people who are speaking the same language with me. This helps me to belong to the group."[138] In some cases, such groups can also provide material support or even loans; as a woman from DR Congo recounted, "[t]he group helps me not just in counselling, telling me how to protect myself; in terms of money, the group [also] gives me loans that I use. I cannot sleep hungry when I am in this group – we help each other and we love each other."[139]

The value of peer counselling to remain hopeful or regain optimism is particularly evident in the context of self-help groups for survivors of gender-based violence. As a member of one such a group remarked, "I invest a lot of time to offer people counselling, seeking to support their hope."[140] This also applies to Men of Hope and Men of Courage, two self-help groups for male survivors of sexual violence that exist across Uganda. These groups are led and organized by survivors and supported by the Refugee Law Project. By combining peer counselling with social and economic support, Schulz argues that these groups offer "safe spaces for storytelling and disclosure [and] facilitate a

136 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala.
137 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala.
138 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 June 2017, Kampala.
139 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kampala.
140 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.

process that responds to survivors' most prevalent gendered harms, enabling them to renegotiate their gender identities, repair relationships, and mitigate isolation, as well as to obtain a sense of recognition of their marginalized and silenced experiences. As a result, numerous survivors attest that 'the group is also a sense of justice'" (2020, 162). Edström, Dolan, Shahrokh, and Onen further stress that, "within the peer support group, feelings of isolation and hopelessness are countered by the building of relationships with other men that understand a shared reality" (2016, 28; see also Edström and Dolan 2018). The insights of interlocutors echo such values, and one woman underscored how peer counselling was not limited to discussing problems; indeed, "[t]here are times for everything, for laughing, for crying,"[141] which gave her hope and strength to keep going.

However, memories of violence and loss during conflicts, current difficulties in exile, and uncertainties about the future can weigh so heavily that interlocutors also expressed hopelessness. One woman shared how in the war in Somalia "my parents died. I have no hope."[142] Another one spoke about persecution in Burundi and the continued fear of spies in Kampala: "It is hard to have hope with the life [I] am going through now."[143] A man from DR Congo stressed: "A refugee can't have hope."[144] Similarly, a young man in Kyaka II rued: "The biggest challenge we have here is that there is no future … As we are living here, nothing is ensuring us that we have a future." With insufficient access to education and opportunities, life is reduced to the absolute bare minimum: "We are just living like people who don't have brains, as animals. Because an animal is just living, eating, and not thinking." He continued: "There is no support and there is no hope. To me, even if I suffer today when I know that tomorrow it will be a better day, then there is no problem. Suffering just for a moment and to know that you will get better tomorrow. But we have no hope of tomorrow."[145]

Self-help groups seek to provide support and peer counselling for individuals who are enduring such challenges, but the reach of smaller groups is limited. Time and again, interlocutors stressed the

141 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.
142 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kampala.
143 Woman from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
144 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
145 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.

importance of belief and especially religious faith for remaining hopeful. Most – if not all – mentioned their religious denomination, and regardless of which one it was, faith constituted a key source of strength for them. A woman who had suffered violence and beatings before escaping to Uganda with her children remarked, "[a]t the moment, my hope is in Allah."[146] One man noted that he does not feel safe as he hears "stories that some Burundians have been killed … Thievery is also very rampant in Uganda." However, his belief in God is key: "As a Christian, I understand such challenges occur … I have faith that it will be okay in the future."[147]

It was by no means solely faith that individuals perceived as helpful here. Practising religion together, self-organizing in a community, creating and drawing on the support and protection people provide mutually are equally impactful. In discussing the poor living conditions in Kyaka II, one man explained that people prayed together in "different churches in Kyaka II."[148] Moreover, a woman who had lost most of her family, including her husband and children, during the war in DR Congo, said that "Survival is hard. I used to go begging, and one day I met Father [name redacted]. The father was once in DR Congo, [and he] talked [to me] and helped me." She went on to explain that initially it was the father who prayed with her and supported her materially in paying for her medical bills. Then she became part of the church community, which provided her with even more comfort, encouragement, and help. "We meet every weekend. They are my family now," she said. The spaces of trust and support this community offers were extended over time, as members "sponsored me to study and learn English" as well as "to get a place for my shop." She emphasized that in this community, "we take care of ourselves."[149]

These perspectives underscore the significance of hope and belief in individuals' well-being. People self-organize and form groups that provide mutual support – whether through peer counselling, collective prayer, fostering strong bonds, or spending time together. Hope and belief function as coping strategies, particularly within collectives.

146 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 25 November 2016, Kampala.
147 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
148 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.
149 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have explored refugees' social embeddedness and the centrality of their self-organization thereto. We deliberately focused on the mundane relations of families, friends, and neighbours with regards to their support of people's emotional and social well-being. To this end, we reflected on the dual meaning of refugees' self-organization as both a practice of engaging in collective actions and as organizational entities that people establish and lead. We addressed how newly arriving people in Kampala and Kyaka II receive support from the individuals and especially collectives already present in these respective sites. By providing material assistance, giving shelter, as well as sharing valuable information, such self-organized support highlights the various key ways in which individuals and collectives become first responders and providers.

The value of social support systems extends beyond the immediate circumstances of arrival and is illustrated through people's choices regarding where to live. Often those sharing nationality, ethnicity, and/or language decide to reside in the same areas. This represents not merely a way of coping with the oftentimes challenging living conditions in Uganda's camp and urban settings; it also shows how individuals self-organize and how they collectively and proactively shape these diverse contexts. They appropriate spaces and establish specific neighbourhoods despite the many restrictions they encounter. These practices produce senses of familiarity and belonging, although uncertainties and challenges prevail. Moreover, individuals use mobilities strategically to deal with challenges and establish livelihoods. Informal and formalized refugee-led organizations play key roles in all of these endeavours, be it via social support and protection, economic collaboration, or offering meeting spaces – in these ways, self-organizations connect people and collectives in and across different sites.

Collective practices of self-organization serve as a vital conduit for individuals to exercise agency, enabling them to navigate the complexities of their environments while simultaneously contributing to the social fabric of their communities – thereby also allowing others to benefit from them. Furthermore, these practices reveal how they mobilize resources and networks, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual agency and collective action. By fostering social connections, self-organizations enable displaced people to reclaim

agency, fostering adaptability in the face of adversity. Ultimately, their engagement in self-organized activities not only addresses people's immediate needs but also shape and reshapes their social structures beyond political, legal, and humanitarian regulations.

Despite the considerable relevance of self-organizing in everyday life, challenges also arise in and from collectives. These are partly produced by the difficulties of life in exile, as Paul* expressively revealed in his reflections. Moreover, familial care not only reflects a core motive for coping with challenges but can also become burdensome; and close social collectives and friends not only reflect key safety nets but can also contribute to risks. It is frequently their formalized self-organizations that set out to provide the necessary support in such instances, most notably through peer counselling and spaces of belonging. This was evident in the reflections shared by the Director of the LGBTQ+ refugee-led organization on the support extended to queer refugees, and by Janvier Hafasha on the work of the Hodari Foundation for children.

Whether through providing assistance in emergencies, conscious mobilities, caring for children, sharing information, or refugees' choice to live in close proximity to each other, the diverse realms of activity in everyday life have in common that they indicate how individuals practise agency and are socially embedded. Such agency ultimately "both reproduces and transforms … structures in interactive response to the problems" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 970). In this sense, what is key is less the effect actions must have, but the actions of individuals per se – and the intersubjective process of being able to act in this specific situation. Individuals' actions can contribute to collective action, and both are inherently intertwined. As we saw in our research, agency is facilitated by self-organized social support systems that contribute to and (re)produce social structures beyond the limiting humanitarian, political, and legal ones in place.

6

"We Work Together"

Self-Organization, Socio-Economic Strategies, and Prevailing Difficulties

During our research, we crossed paths with one woman from DR Congo who by that point had been living in Kampala for nine years. She was active in a support group led by displaced women, which over the years had become a formalized self-organization with bylaws and leadership structures. Meeting "once a week," the organization primarily focuses on self-help and psychosocial support by and for women. The woman explained how important this is to her, especially after she had survived an acid attack – "people poured chemicals on my face" – while working in a store in Kampala. Members provided her and her children with a safe space, but this was not enough as she struggled to earn sufficient income after the attack. By offering a platform for women to meet, exchange thoughts, and provide collective support, the initially socially oriented self-organization developed certain economic facets. The woman explained how she started to sell chitenge, traditional fabrics, together with other members on the street, stressing, "I join my fellow women; we work together and help each other in everything."[1]

Her narrative underscores the importance of engaging in self-organized social collectives to navigate the myriad challenges displaced people experience in Kampala and Kyaka II. Self-organization plays crucial roles across all spheres of everyday life, thereby intertwining social and economic values and practices. Beyond the top-down decisions imposed on refugees by humanitarian and political actors, people shape their social and thus also their economic surroundings – whether

1 Woman from DR Congo, discussion, 24 June 2017, Kampala.

by creating local markets, engaging in trading, receiving remittances, or appropriating and selling humanitarian goods.

An increasing body of research also addresses not only the economic challenges, constraints, and uncertainties refugees face living in camps and urban areas alike (e.g., Kaiser 2006; Campbell 2006; Agier 2011; Bartolomei 2015) but also how they create economic opportunities and generate income (e.g., Kibreab 1996; Jacobsen 2005; Oka 2014; Omata 2017a). Whether building networks and collaborating with actors from the private sector (e.g., Omata and Kaplan 2013; Betts, Omata, et al. 2017), selling goods and establishing local trade centres (e.g., Porter et al. 2008; Oka 2011), or receiving and locally investing remittances (e.g., Horst 2006; Lindley 2010; Jacobsen et al. 2014), their economic practices vary widely and contribute to their surrounding communities. The economic circumstances are partly captured in so-called refugee economies in camps, with scholars exploring the diverse actors and influences shaping and creating such local practices (e.g., Werker 2007; Oka 2011; Alloush et al. 2017; Betts, Bloom, et al. 2017; Betts, Omata, et al. 2017). The discussions address the effects of the political, humanitarian, and legal structures on refugees' economic strategies, but also the ways in which they nurture economic productivity beyond such structures. While issues remain multifaceted, not least due to the often isolated set-up of camps, individuals navigate the circumstances. As reflected in the previous chapter, even seemingly isolated camps have diverse permeabilities via trading, school attendance, and people's social relations (see also Jacobsen 2005; Omata and Kaplan 2013; Vancluysen 2021, 2022).

While such economic practices are highly relevant on their own, we are particularly interested in the social entanglements and individual initiatives in these endeavours. We thus delve into refugees' self-organization, economic strategies, and social meanings in this chapter in an effort to that demonstrate the relational aspect of seemingly individual economic practices. This does not refer to measurable economic output – for example, the revenues displaced people generate or how much they earn. Instead, we place the social implications and impacts of their economic practices in Kampala and Kyaka II at the core.

We generally understand economic practices to denote those that contribute to one's subsistence and livelihood, such as formal and informal employment, establishing independent enterprises (e.g., hairdressers, restaurants, shops), and forming economic networks (e.g., to trade goods or in savings groups). Alongside this, we explore the roles of

self-organized social collectives for economic endeavours and the social meanings of these practices, which is why we also refer to them as socio-economic ones. We thus continue to explore the dual understanding of refugees' self-organization as organizational entities that they form and lead and as practices of engaging in collective activities.

With this, we turn the relational approach to agency, following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), to refugees' embeddedness in socio-economic relations through their interactions and practices. This enables us to analyze the social meanings of refugees' heterogeneous economic practices. These practices and meanings do not exclusively result from restrictive humanitarian structures; rather, they are contextually constituted from patterns of (inter)action that individuals learned in past or present (such as different employment biographies), and from one's orientation toward the future (such as hopes and aspirations). Moreover, they reflect how individuals' self-organized collective actions contribute to and (re)produce social structures that facilitate their agency. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 1009) point out, this might have a productive effect as actors can encounter obstacles to their habitual practices and become "pioneers" through the ways in which they select and reconstruct courses of action. The significance of such deeds does not necessarily stem only from their intended effects, but relates to their unintended ones too.

In the following, we build on the prior chapters' analyses of refugees' hardships in Kyaka II and Kampala and analyze economic practices, their social meanings, and finally also risky practices in everyday life in exile. How individuals cope with economic challenges, engaging in a variety of income-generating activities such as businesses, services, and networks, is addressed first. We also reflect on the importance of formalized self-organizations through vocational training and saving opportunities, for example. Then we explore the social meanings of economic practices, revealing how individuals and self-organizations become experts, risk mitigators, and reinforcing catalysts, primarily by using and sharing situated knowledges. Finally, we delve into risky economic environments, highlighting instances where refugees have to resort to perilous practices to earn a livelihood due to the lack of safe alternatives.

The crucial socio-economic roles that refugees' self-organizations play is emphasized in the reflections on the Kyaka Interpreters, Translators Association for Development (KITAD), the Kyaka II Refugee Led Organisation Network (KRLON), and business entrepreneurship

that Isreal Katembo shared with us. We mentioned KITAD and KRLON in previous chapters, and we are very grateful to Isreal Katembo for allowing us to include his reflection here. His insight on self-organizing over the course of many years reveals the power of individuals coming together in collectives to provide socio-economic support to community members and thereby transforming the restrictive structures in the camp. His reflections thereby illustrate how economic, social, and also political meanings are inherently intertwined.

REFLECTIONS ON KITAD, KRLON, AND BUSINESS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Isreal Katembo

You are yet to find out how people, who had no hope, have restored hope in many families and lives, how they are creating a positive livelihood and making an alternative in ensuring social and economic wellbeing.

My name is Isreal Katembo, and I was born in 1985. I was among thousands of refugees who were forced to leave the Democratic Republic of Congo for Uganda at teenage age in 1992. To date, most refugees are fleeing violence emerging from ethnic-political conflicts between the government and different militia groups and foreign armed groups active largely in Kivu and parts of Ituri Province.

When I reached Kyaka II refugee settlement in 1993, I could not smile because I had lost most of my friends in childhood during war in Beni, North Kivu. I witnessed the deaths of other refugees and asylum seekers, dying of hunger and diseases due to limited proper medical and humanitarian intervention.

Kyaka II is home for a diverse community, including refugees and the host community. The relationship has always been positive because refugees and host communities share natural resources like land, water, social services – namely schools and health services. Yet, while attending school in the camp, classes were overcrowded with more than 200 pupils. Life was complicated without hope and a clear vision for each child. And it was during this time I started realizing that the community members can play a role in their life that can change things.

INITIATING CHANGES IN THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

although humanitarian and development agencies are realizing some interventions, gaps remain because the people are not involved in the planning and implementation process. However, even when community members are involved, gaps in communication can persist due to the language barrier, conflicts of interest of top to bottom planning procedures and the bureaucratic process.

While at Bukere primary school in 2005, I was elected the head prefect by fellow students and subsequently head prefect at the secondary school and the college. I had learnt that a leader is elected by all community members. However, this practice is not the same in semi-leadership structures for refugees in Kyaka II. Even though the activity of election is put in place, only individuals in the interest of those in power to support refugees are the ones who are allowed to participate in leadership, because in my experience the nomination and electoral committee is made available by aid agencies only. Moreover, after college, I had realized that most people in the camp are not informed of their rights and children were dropping out from school on a large scale.

KITAD

Together with others, I wanted to help and improve things. To this end, I mobilized three friends, Ntakiruti James, Baraka Benedict and Ishimwe Vannesa, in 2013 to start up an early childhood development centre. Our Youth Initiative for Development in Africa (YIDA) is still operating and ranks the best in providing education to refugee and host communities around Kyaka II.

I further mobilized fellow youth whom I attended school with to form a community-based organization to provide interpretation and translation services to communities. As a result, we created Kyaka Interpreters, Translators Association for Development (KITAD), with the aim of sensitizing communities and disseminating information about rights to new and old refugees, where to access different service providers, how and when to report any breach of rights and laws. Although our group is now successfully installed, we had a difficult start: The group was tagged as being subversive by the government, most members were threatened with arrest and removed from the list of casual labourers in the camp; most members feared. Yet, KITAD now has 128 members and is registered as a community-based organization at the sub-county and Kyegegwa District.

Since members are in different villages, they provide paralegal services, following cases of domestic violence and report them to aid agencies in Kyaka II for further management. To a small extent, communities now have started demanding their rights every time they notice that their fundamental rights are being breached. Not only that, it is very unfortunate that most systems and policies in government and non-government structures at different levels do not consider or favour youth. Youth pass through a hard time to legalise their own initiatives and have less engagement in decision-making that concerns them even at the regional and national level. Still, many institutions do not appreciate and trust youth efforts being at the forefront in developing communities through resilience and commitment. Even when youth show their capacities and abilities for proper accountabilities, institutions do not believe that youth can be trusted and so do not invest in their ideals. In due course, a lot of resources are put into less use and many youth are left jobless; unlawful behaviour increases; the situation worsened as the pandemic hit underserved communities who remained vulnerable.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Vocational-skills training is a last resort when formal education is not an option. Together with a number of outgoing school youth, I initiated a vocational-skills training centre under the tree in Kyaka II. It is especially for youth who are not in the position to continue in the formal education system in Uganda (e.g., due to a lack of school fees or food, or due to child-headed families, far distances to secondary schools, and diseases).

A focus is also put on women, who often do not ordinarily qualify for financial support from aid organisations to start up a business and are rarely able to communicate in English, causing an overwhelming number of young women in Kyaka II to be unemployed. In addition to protection, youth therefore consistently demand programs with tangible skills to improve their livelihood potentials, and our training centre seeks to increase the capacity to find jobs, make job creators or facilitate self-employment, thus promoting self-reliance.

In connection with KITAD, it is operating Themboe Mult Action Wood and Metal Works Limited focusing on economic empowerment of youth through vocational training, skill development and encourage positive mind-set change. With limited resources, to date,

we have trained 140 youths in carpentry and joinery with business-management skills, and essentially create hope among families.

After the training, the trainees are establishing micro enterprises to enhance their employability as well as their livelihood security.

NETWORKING AND COLLECTIVE ACTIONS FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Festo and I mobilised all emerging organised groups in different zones in Kyaka II, and on 2 February 2022, Kyaka II Refugee Led Organisation Network (KRLON) was founded. The network is uniting all of the refugee led organisations (RLOs), community based organisations (CBOs) and groups of Kyaka II refugee settlement and host communities. KRLON is now composed of 98 CBO members and 434 groups. We focus on strengthening the coordination, acting as a collective voice for policy influence, promoting partnerships and building the capacities of local organisations to be effective first and post-recovery responders to humanitarian issues in Kyaka II. RLOs and CBOs are well positioned to address the needs of their communities. I learnt that "the only boxes that last are the ones that we create by ourselves." RLOs and CBOs have local knowledge, strong relationships, they are flexible in implementation and cost-effective in their operations, allowing them to maximize impact of available resources. Thus being innovative, filling gaps and creating safe space for communities, self-capacity building first to better capacitate groups.

However, many RLOs and CBOs need more skills, knowledge and systems to support themselves effectively, manage their operations, deliver programs and measure their impact as requested by aid actors. Most RLOs and CBOs have limited access to resources, they often struggle to secure stable and sufficient funding to support operations, most of which find it challenging to find technical personnel to handle required actionable activities, thus making it difficult to deliver programmes effectively. RLOs and CBOs lack visibilities and recognitions, they struggle to create awareness of their work and fail to secure support from key stakeholders including government, development actors and local communities.

I have been seeing these issues for many years and aim to improve these conditions. For regional development, early February 2023, I championed an online entrepreneurship business curative

programme connecting five refugee settlements in western Uganda: namely Kyaka II, Rwamwanja, Oruchinga, Nakivale and Kyangwali. It focuses on identifying entrepreneurs and training them on best practices on how to start and grow business in refugee settings. A team-development session was conducted and business mentors were identified, seeking those with entrepreneurial DNA or mind-set to participate in the online mentorship sessions which are conducted twice a month; mentors replicate information to business builders in their respective settlements and communities.

I see Kyaka II being a centre for learning in the long run because refugees have joined in efforts to better their communities. We reinforce that startups do not need funding, they need revenues because the more revenues the business makes the more fundable they become. We have 625 business startups from refugees and host communities in five refugee settlements respectively that we are mentoring, I with my team.

FURTHER NEEDS

With our initiatives, we are supporting younger refugees especially to thrive. In KITAD, we focus on sharing important information with others. In our vocational-skills training centre, we provide access to education, trainings and community services, and help people to gain skills and improve conditions in the community in Kyaka II and beyond. Moreover, in our new online entrepreneurship business curative programme, we share best practices and help refugees improve their businesses and work in RLOs and CBOs. However, our initiatives can only be seen as a starting point because during everyday life in Kyaka II, we continue to experience issues.

Generously contributed on 3 May 2023

"We Co-operate with each other": Self-organizing as/and Socio-economic resources

How people move forward and create economic opportunities for themselves and others in the challenging conditions of Kyaka II and Kampala are the topics to which we now turn. Similar to the self-organized initiatives that Israel Katembo shares in his reflections,

interlocutors narrated how they adapt and mobilize skills and resources to forge paths and foster livelihood opportunities. Key are social collectives. A man from DR Congo we spoke with in Kyaka II identified the essence of this in remarking, "[w]e co-operate with each other."[2] Such co-operation occurs in informal and formalized self-organizations supporting economic practices in various ways. Despite the importance of self-organized opportunities, for many, a life lived from hand to mouth continues; few are able to earn enough, and consistently so, to live free of worry. Instead, covering even basic needs remains difficult – and thus there are not many alternatives other than continuing to seek economic opportunities and work together.

Individuals' Economic Practices and Self-Organized Collectives: Markets, Mobilities, and Remittances

The economic practices that people use to generate income are wide-ranging, going far beyond the approaches that Uganda's refugee regime dictates. Although urban settings like Kampala generally provide greater opportunities for income generation, in Kyaka II people also relayed that they engage in agriculture and sell their harvest; run shops for food, everyday items, and mobile phones; own restaurants or hair salons; engage in trade of various kinds; work as street vendors and hawk, selling handmade items like jewelry or food; offer services such as farming; are *boda boda* drivers (motorbike taxi) or tailors; and, for some, find employment as community workers for aid organizations. To return to the man whose words inform the main heading of this section, and thereby illustrate how such economic practices often rely on social collectives and collaboration over the use of different resources, "[w]e co-operate with each other. People bring up ideas and work together. For example, someone comes to you and says, 'I cannot plough the land, but I can get the seeds.' So you plough the land, they contribute the seeds. Then you share the harvest depending on how you will have negotiated."[3]

Just like the self-organized agricultural collectives (thus beyond humanitarian governance) he was referring to, further joint economic endeavours bring people together and thereby contribute to an arranging and rearranging of social relations within the camp and the city. A case in point is trading activities, which frequently come into

2 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.
3 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

collision with the humanitarian regulations – for example, due to the need for mobility. It is often their social context and thus surroundings that inform a person's decision to move on from or stay in a certain place, and thereby also engage in certain collectives. This can mean moving to specific areas within Kampala or Kyaka II, ones perceived as more economically dynamic and attractive.

Facing Economic Difficulties and Pursuing Various Strategies

Many interlocutors in Kampala explained their motivation for moving to the city was to seek better livelihoods and employment opportunities, which corresponds with other studies (Dryden-Peterson 2006; Grabska 2006; Campbell 2006; Jacobsen et al. 2014). Many had heard about the precarious conditions in Uganda's camps from other refugees, noting, for example, that there people face "suffering";[4] gender-based violence and other insecurities such as "spies for the government [of their country of origin]";[5] are confronted with "a lot of sicknesses without proper medication";[6] and have to cultivate land[7] while simultaneously finding "no jobs, no training opportunities."[8] Hence, although Uganda's legal and political framework dictates that refugees must stay in camps, many said that they had taken the conscious and strategic decision to live somewhere urban like Kampala – whether already on arrival in Uganda or at some point thereafter. Accordingly, one woman who runs a shop stressed, "Life is so hard in the refugee settlement … The business environment is better in Kampala than in the settlement. Since I also wanted to do business where I can move around for customers, Kampala was my best option. Business can't do well in a settlement because the people in the settlement always want free things."[9] Resonating with these words, another person reasoned that his move to Kampala was to "get opportunities"[10]

4 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 November 2016, Kampala.
5 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
6 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala.
7 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 14 July 2017, Kampala.
8 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.
9 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
10 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala.

to earn income. Likewise, a woman running a hair salon in Kampala stated, "I realized that I could not manage life in the settlement. In the settlement there is no business activity."[11]

Although Kampala provides a more diverse environment with broader economic opportunities compared to camps, extensive economic hardships prevail. Interlocutors explained having to pursue a range of different livelihood strategies, as informed by the environment they are situated in. Their income-generating activities are mostly located within or close to the area where they live, and through that they create economic surroundings offering shops, restaurants, hair salons, boutiques, and petty trade such as selling soaps, crafts, sugar, or handmade bracelets.[12] Interlocutors also described that they engage in "odd jobs,"[13] moving around and taking opportunities as they arise. One woman said that her husband could not find regular employment but would "earn a little income on the side," which included the "electrical wiring of buildings."[14] Another person highlighted, "[m]y only challenge is really [a] lack of income." He had sold handmade jewelry in the past, but it was not enough. He stressed to us, "I do odd jobs to get income to meet my basic needs. I keep hope in my heart that one day things will be better."[15]

While the primary economic focus in Kyaka II is on agriculture and harvest, many reported rarely being able to produce enough food, let alone maintain a livelihood; they faced hunger and poverty and were unable to cover basic needs.[16] Their precarious existence is evident in one woman's words. We met her after she had returned from the market, where she had sold some sweet bananas that she had picked herself. She said that she cannot find employment in the camp and explained, "I just came with a basin of bananas and I have 6,000 Ugandan shilling

11 Woman from DR Congo, discussion, 14 July 2017, Kampala.
12 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, discussion, 14 July 2017, Kampala; man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
13 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
14 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
15 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
16 E.g., woman from Burundi, dialogue, 8 July 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 July 2017, Kyaka II.

now that I will use to buy tomatoes, onions, and cooking fat to make meals."[17] Hence, the money she earned went immediately to other required items.

However, these issues – along with the restrictive camp conditions – do not mean that the people simply give up. Instead, they develop ways to cope with the hardships and create economic opportunities. A key approach is collaborating with others on cultivating the land. One interlocutor described the benefits accruing from working together in an agricultural co-operative, addressing how the shared experience can provide companionship: "When you dig with one person, if the day fails, you lose the day together. If it rains, it hits you together. It's because of the conditions. You share the same suffering, and you can endure."[18] In a discussion with two women and four men, meanwhile, they recounted how they had formed a group to ensure greater profit. "We also dig for each other in rotation," noted one woman; a man added that "sometimes we go in a group. We dig, we help each other." Yet the plots were small, leading another woman to complain, "[t]he challenge now is we do not have enough harvest for us to keep in storage. It would be helpful if they gave us additional land to dig in the groups and have a better harvest."[19] Hence, despite their collaboration, they continued to face significant economic challenges, social marginalization, prevalent risks of gender-based violence, and enduring uncertainties concerning their future.

Refugees not only respond to the constraints and challenges created by humanitarian structures but also actively navigate and make use of them to pursue their own goals. While few people were employed by aid organizations, many drew on their services to economic ends. Livelihood support played a role too. The case of goat-rearing that a man in Kyaka II shared is an illustrative example:

> In my village, we had many groups of goats. The DRC [Danish Refugee Council] came and distributed the goats to different people, but then over time some died, others were stolen, others were slaughtered, and it just dissolved. Then we sat and discussed, and said that if this group collapses we have nothing, so we decided to change it to collect money ... And at this

17 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kyaka II.
18 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.
19 Discussion with two women and four men, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

> point there are no goats in my village. But the group came back and collected money.[20]

This shows how groups are not only used as humanitarian tools (see chapter 3); refugees also strategically self-organize to use, adapt, and capitalize on humanitarian initiatives; and they maintain them if they find them relevant to their everyday lives and incorporate it into their "repertoire" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980–1). In this case, a group originally promoted by an aid organization as a means of livelihood support self-organized to remained together as a savings group after encountering obstacles. Humanitarian incentives can, as such, be perceived and used as one of several economic possibilities, with people simultaneously combining them with their own livelihood strategies.

Such economic practices are also discussed in research (e.g., Kibreab 1996; Jacobsen 2005; Oka 2014; Omata 2017a; Altındağ et al. 2020). Grabska similarly stresses that "refugees come up with creative ways of managing their livelihoods, contributing both economically and culturally to the host society" (2006, 287), while Betts, Omata, and Bloom refer to refugees as "entrepreneurs" and "innovators" due to their economic endeavours (2017, 729). Our research shows that while such practices can be highly individual, they are nonetheless embedded in some kind of self-organized social system. These insights demonstrate the relational aspect of these agentic practices by highlighting the social implications and impacts of economic practices, ascribing social meanings to them.

SELF-ORGANIZING TRADE, MOBILITIES, MARKETS, AND FUNDS

While Viswanathan, Arias, and Sreekumar (2021) find that refugees are confronted with extreme economic exclusion and relative deprivation in subsistence marketplaces in Nakivale, another camp in Uganda, our research both corresponds with these difficulties and restrictions but also reveals that those in Kyaka II – as in the city – create highly diverse economic markets and therefore shape their social surroundings. Such economic permeabilities and dynamics are also discussed in other studies about refugee camps in Uganda and beyond (e.g., Jacobsen 2005; Werker 2007; Oka 2011; Omata and Kaplan 2013;

20 Man from Rwanda, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

Omata 2017a; Betts, Bloom, et al. 2017; Vancluysen 2021). In Kyaka II, as a noteworthy example, one can find many Congolese goods, for which some people regularly travel to Kampala and other urban areas as well as to the border with DR Congo to buy jewelry, chitenge, and other goods like shoes or bags to later sell on to their customers. Although such travels formally require permission from camp authorities, many said they moved without them.

Economic relations with those living in Kampala were mentioned particular frequency by interlocutors in the camp. This becomes obvious also in the privately run minibuses that operate daily between Kyaka II and Kampala or in the *boda bodas* to the camp's nearest towns, Kygegwa and Mubende, frequently running when the market is on. By their mobilities, people initiate, draw on, engage in, and (re) produce a heterogeneous landscape of social networks, diversify resources, and thus shape both the social and economic milieus, establishing markets also for people beyond their immediate communities. Traders from various parts of western Uganda visit Kyaka II's markets, benefiting from the relatively low prices but also diverse resources there. Hence, such economic activities produce social networks beyond their direct surroundings and unfold valuable effects for other refugees and host communities too (concerning such developments in Kenya, see Oka 2011; Alix-Garcia et al. 2018).

For their socio-economic practices, interlocutors have to consider the local demands, and several described how they gather and offer specific goods to meet them, such as ducks, certain types of oil, or small fish.[21] This also applies to services. In such pursuits, they often use both the life skills learned prior to flight and the knowledges they have acquired in adapting to the camp setting. One woman stressed that "trouble teaches,"[22] and other interlocutors likewise described actively and openly seeking solutions to the challenges they face.[23] Hence, they use mobilities and thereby share knowledges and establish

21 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2017, Kyaka II.

22 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

23 E.g., discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II; discussion with five women, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kyaka II.

joint businesses, which resonates with the work of Omata, who reflects on how mobilities are a "livelihood asset" (2017a, 38–9).

While these strategies are as such self-organized, they further indicate the roles of self-organizations as entities. Given the general importance of refugees' self-organizations and social support systems (see prior chapters), both informal and formalized ones emerge and are meaningful for refugees' socio-economic lives. In fact, the majority of interlocutors said that they were enmeshed in socio-economic relationships in Kyaka II and Kampala, not only in the form of collaboration such as trading but also by receiving financial help from friends, community members, and relatives. Oftentimes the closest social collective is the one that supports income generation: Many spoke about how they pool funds among friends, and thus how the latter not only represent a social safety net but also a network catalyzing economic endeavour.[24]

Interlocutors discussed living in close proximity as contributing to these ties: "I am trying to network and ask people for help, especially from Congolese friends."[25] One woman in Kampala noted, "I borrow money from friends when business is slow"[26] – a statement that many echoed. Another told us about her economic difficulties and the fact that she was barely able to survive with the little she earned. She decided she wanted to start her own business, recalling how instrumental her friends were in helping out as they "just pooled funds together." They later also supported her in finding a spot for her shop – "we help each other whenever there is need."[27] A woman from DR Congo explained how she had been looking for work, but with no luck. She and her friends then decided to pool funds to buy products and create jewelry and baskets, which they sell as street vendors in Kampala. Moving together "in a group of two or three," she explained, "we can help each other in case of a problem. One day, I fell down with all my merchandise. But because my friends were with me, none of my jewelry was stolen; they gathered it up quickly."[28]

24 E.g., woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; man from Rwanda, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.
25 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
26 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala
27 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala.
28 Woman, DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

One particular means of collective socio-economic support that refugees self-organize even transnationally is remittances. This applies particularly to those who have relatives or friends in their countries of origin or those who were resettled elsewhere abroad and now send money to those in Uganda. Individuals from Somalia especially noted receiving remittances,[29] whether regularly or occasionally, but this was by no means limited to them.[30] For example, one man even stated that he and his family "survive on remittances from relatives in Burundi."[31] Over the past few years, scholars have reflected on how refugees establish networks of support for sending and receiving remittances (e.g., Horst 2006, 2008; Lindley 2010; Johnson and Stoll 2008; Jacobsen et al. 2014). Yet, the feeling of having to send remittances can be a burden when one is unable to meet social expectations (see also Akuei 2005; Kankonde 2010; Omata 2013). In our research, no one noted sending money (back) to their relatives – primarily because of their inability to do so due to the prevailing economic shortcomings and precarities encountered. Instead, the diverse benefits of receiving remittances were highlighted: being a source of income, helping cover one's expenses in times of emergency, but also enabling people to launch or keep up their businesses – with some even relying on this money for survival in everyday life. Similar self-organized support was also regularly provided by collectives in close proximity; yet it was emphasized that it was becoming increasingly difficult to do so because of the adverse conditions faced.

In discussing remittances and the pooling of funds, interlocutors highlight the importance of the availability of finances for people to be able to build their own income strategies, and vice versa. In Kyaka II, livelihood support provided by agencies principally aims to close such shortfalls, yet it turns out to revolve around limited and time-bound initiatives – further to only being provided to groups. For some, such livelihood support also constitutes a challenge, since they stated that they did not want to or could not participate in imposed group activities.

29 E.g., man from Somalia, dialogue, 25 November 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 25 November 2016, Kampala; man from Somalia, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kampala.

30 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala; man from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2017, Kampala.

31 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

Among other cited reasons, this was due to a lack of time,[32] insufficient resources to pool,[33] or wanting to make one's own decisions.[34]

Economic Roles of Formalized Self-Organizations: Training, Savings Groups, and (a Lack of) Capital

In Kyaka II and Kampala, people draw on, build, and use various formalized self-organized economic groups to facilitate livelihoods and income generation for their members. This can be seen in agricultural co-operatives, which combine people's individual resources to generate a greater harvest and produce higher prices at market due to the larger quantity of goods on sale. There are also groups that focus on producing goods to then sell them together and running other businesses co-operatively. Yet, beyond such common collaborative practices, formalized self-organizations also offer services for members to support their own economic strategies, vocational trainings and collective savings being central here.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING TO GAIN KNOWLEDGE AND ECONOMIC SELF-RELIANCE

A core area of several formalized self-organizations is to offer skills training to other refugees. Representatives spoke of a wide range of training formats in different areas, including agricultural work,[35] arts and crafts,[36] language classes (especially in English and Luganda),[37] business,[38] and tailoring.[39] Several interlocutors gave a long list of

32 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 June 2017, Kyaka II.
33 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 18 June 2017, Kyaka II.
34 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
35 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 July 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2017, Kyaka II.
36 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; discussion with ten women from DR Congo and Rwanda, 16 November 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2016, Kyaka II.
37 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 6 March 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 June 2017, Kampala.
38 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 March 2017, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala; discussion with three men and two women from DR Congo, 17 July 2017, Kampala.
39 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; discussion with five women from DR Congo, 9 December 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.

training schemes they provided – for example, in "in mushroom growing, baking, and tailoring. We also run a savings group, football club, English and computer class, dance and drama, as well as a business training class."[40] Another offered "salon and hairdressing, tailoring, liquid soap making, business training, we teach them to manage books, and [a] savings scheme."[41]

While most trainings revolve around such thematic areas, some formalized self-organizations also emphasize the strategic intersection of livelihoods and well-being. This includes the Refugee Welfare Foundation (RWF), which was founded and is led by Gato, co-author of this book. RWF combines livelihood support with mental health and psychosocial services to enhance refugees' well-being and strengthen their self-reliance and emotional resilience. In addition to individual counselling, RWF offers a range of activities such as a community-based group program using self-help curriculum, peer counselling training, and mental health awareness programs. Moreover, the organization conducts basic life skills training through a tailoring workshop, organizes savings groups, and provides training in briquette making and financial literacy. Through these integrated services, RWF seeks to equip refugees with practical tools to rebuild their lives, reinforce psychological coping capacities, and foster long-term social and economic integration.

Given the diversity of approaches and thematic areas, the length of training varies greatly, ranging from between a few hours, to several times a week, to a couple of years' duration. In some cases, people had to pay attendance fees to support the work of the self-organizations; this posed a problem for those who did not have enough money to take part. Not all of the self-organizations demanded fees, however; by working with volunteers, some were able to offer their services for free – posing long-term challenges for the organizers and teachers, as discussed in chapter 4.

We saw first-hand how frequently people take up these offers in Kyaka II and Kampala alike, and many interlocutors perceived such services as being helpful. This was not only for the economic prospects that they nurtured but also due to the social component of meeting people and building collectives. How fruitful such vocational training can be is evident in the insights shared by one young man who had

40 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.
41 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kampala.

taken English classes at a refugee-led organization in Kampala; as he stated, "I am studying information technology at [name redacted] University, but it is hard when you don't know English. That is the reason why I went there."[42] This corresponds with studies addressing roles of refugee-led organizations in entrepreneurship, acquiring skills, and providing mutual support (Betts, Omata, et al. 2017; Easton-Calabria and Hakiza 2021).

Yet, it is crucial to take into account the gender imbalances and patriarchal structures that many self-organizations uphold. As noted in chapter 4, most of the formalized self-organizations we encountered were led by men, with only a few women and LGBTQ+ people[43] in leadership positions. While many self-organizations were said to seek to promote gender equality and empower women and to an extent LGBTQ+ people, especially through economically oriented services such as skills training, these activities were also primarily led and carried out by men. Patriarchal structures evidently translate into male-dominated service provision.

For instance, one man as a leader of a self-organization that sets out to support women explained how this work stems from his own personal experience. He recalled that on arriving in Uganda, "I realized men could easily do something to earn some money, unlike for women and children because it was risky. For example, women who go washing clothes door to door can be violated in such homes where they go." As a result, he explained that "we empower women with skills to enable them to [look after] themselves and avoid such possible scenarios."[44]

While some women attending this group's training told us that the support is helpful, several others voiced criticism. In a discussion with women between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight who had received vocational training in tailoring at this refugee-led organization,[45] different gender-specific issues came to light. All interlocutors criticized the high financial outlay involved; besides having to pay for the training and the materials they used, transport and food costs proved difficult to cover as they were unemployed. Moreover, one person

42 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.
43 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.
44 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kampala.
45 Discussion with five women from DR Congo, 9 December 2016, Kampala.

said that she had been participating for a long time now, but "I can't leave until he [the teacher] certifies me," pointing to gendered power dynamics and dependencies as male teachers exert control over the pace, content, and recognition of training. Another criticized how "sometimes the workload is high when the teacher brings us his clients' work, yet you don't get any benefit," thereby indicating that the training was being misused as unpaid labour. As a result of these issues, the woman stated concurringly, "[m]ost study for a short time and drop out."

The greatest issue conversation partners referred to here revolved around child care. Among the five women, all had children; four were single mothers, and one was married. "We study on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday for a period of two years, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m." These long hours were problematic for them. While four noted that their children were with their families or "in-laws," the fifth woman explained that she did not have such a support system and would not feel comfortable leaving her child with people she did not know well and trust: "Me, personally, if the child is at the daycare, I can't concentrate." This critical example reflects how the precise challenges and lived experiences of women are insufficiently considered. Other interlocutors using the diverse services of formalized self-organizations echoed similar gender-specific challenges.[46]

Moreover, by emphasizing the core aim of "empowering women," the language that the man quoted above used reveals remarkable similarities with the chosen approaches of aid organizations – and scholars' criticisms thereof. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh stresses that these agencies are "systematically failing to identify or address the needs and rights of social groups which have been marginalized from view" (2010, 83), corresponding with a range of other studies about top-down aid delivery (e.g., Edwards 2010; Grabska 2011; Olivius 2013, 2014a; Wirtz 2017; Ritchie 2018; Krause 2021; Sebba 2021). Men such as this particular leader likely do genuinely seek to provide help; however, the personal lived experience drawn on can cause a significant gap to open up between that and what is actually needed.

The importance of women taking up leadership positions in refugees' self-organizations was also apparent in our conversations. Time

46 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 31 January 2017, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kampala.

and again, members, leaders, and representatives stressed the benefits of women assuming such roles,[47] as reflected not least in the work of the women-led organization REAL (discussed in chapter 4). This also applies to queer people in leadership and providing trainings in safe spaces for members. For example, an LGBTQ+ self-organization offers its members access to training in a hair and beauty salon, which also functions as an economic enterprise to gain funds from customers and thus provide training without charge (see chapter 5).[48]

SELF-ORGANIZED SAVINGS GROUPS AS CENTRAL (YET LIMITED) ECONOMIC NETWORKS AND SAFETY NETS

Refugees' formalized self-organizations play important roles in helping people save money too. Savings groups are widespread among refugees in Uganda, and members pay a fixed amount before eventually receiving the whole sum of one deposit in a predetermined order. Such saving schemes date back to the 1960s; for example, Geertz (1962) addressed the rotating credit association, to which Ardener (1964) further identified the savings component – since then becoming prominent (i.e., ROSCAs). This applies to situations of displacement, as refugees use savings groups worldwide (e.g., Jacobsen 2005; Piacentini 2015; Alloush et al. 2017; Pincock et al. 2020; Easton-Calabria and Hakiza 2021), including in digital formats (Dhawan and Zademach 2021, 52–5).

Members of ROSCAs we met in Kyaka II and Kampala similarly explained that their mutual saving is characterized by the principle of rotation as all members deposit a certain amount that one receives. Yet, each collective's regulations and arrangements vary enormously. Weekly contributions were between 1,000 and 30,000 Ugandan shillings, and the number of members differed significantly, ranging from between ten to eighty strong. While all savings groups we came across were based on the principle of rotation, not all had a credit component; those that did had diverse lending practices – some issuing loans to everyone, others only to members.

The institutional background of savings groups varies greatly too; some represent specific self-organizations while others were merely

47 Discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala; discussion with three men and two women from DR Congo, 17 July 2017, Kampala.

48 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

one part of a larger one. Moreover, people variously learned about and joined them, self-organized to found new ones to meet mutual needs and foster opportunities, or brought the knowledges of running such groups from their countries of origin. The latter was the case for a member in Kyaka II who described his reasoning in forming such a group as follows: "I was doing it also in Rwanda, and I have seen that it was helping. This is how we got the idea."[49] The set-up can differ widely too. Members may be exclusively refugees from one or several countries, or refugees and Ugandans together; gender variations exist too, with such groups consisting of women, men, or both. Based on the available data, it is not possible to say whether savings groups exist among LGBTQ+ people specifically, but it is assumed they do given the diverse forms of discrimination people face in many contexts in Uganda.

At heart, the ROSCAs reveal how individual and collective strategies merge for economic reasons. Members receive money that can serve as the start-up capital for small businesses, cover unexpected expenses, fund educational pursuits, and support everyday needs. While refugees have no or only very limited access to banks and their formal credit opportunities, in ROSCAs, efforts to ensure repayment often resemble instances of mutual social control as a result of the associations' reliance on group disbursements, whereby members themselves become the enforcers. Interlocutors highlighted, furthermore, just how important such savings groups are for them. They serve both social and economic purposes in offering collective support in times of (financial) emergency – for example, by covering the "money for house rent, [or] for [the] school fees of my children," as one woman in Kampala stressed.[50] The flexibility vis-à-vis withdrawing money was also remarked on.[51] The self-organized savings groups thus turn into an important socio-economic safety net for their members (e.g., Piacentini 2015; Easton-Calabria and Hakiza 2021). In Kyaka II, aid organizations at times intervened in the groups, under the guise of professionalization and change. As one man explained, "[w]e had something similar. In [DR] Congo, we organized within a period of a month, or a period agreed on, we go to a person's home and we give that person [money] and then the following months we would give another person [money]. But here we are trained to keep

49 Man from Rwanda, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
50 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 June 2017, Kampala.
51 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.

records and to have an organized group, and then we keep [the] money in [a] box [so that it] can be in one central place."[52]

Humanitarian support of savings groups ostensibly seeks to make these groups profitable – albeit based on external calculations rather than those of the people concerned. So-called extension workers are hence trained who are supposed to inform the respective groups about preferred practices, following the problematic logic of multipliers to reach as many people as possible. This partly also applies to other groups, such as agricultural or livestock-rearing ones, and broadly serves to promote the policy aim of self-reliance. As one aid worker explained, "[w]e also organize training for the extension workers, of course. Some of them came from [DR] Congo and they had a little background knowledge from there. But our main priority was to [ensure] they can provide training in their communities. And they are now quite knowledgeable."[53]

This can have unintended negative consequences, however; for instance, when groups follow the advice to install credit lines with accompanying rates of interest. This can limit other people's access to credit, reducing what was formerly a positive effect for the broader social environment (Schmidt 2023). This can be read as a prime example of the adverse effects of humanitarian incentives previously discussed. Through conditions of support, humanitarian actors inform people's expectations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 979–81) and thus influence their methods of self-organizing. Interlocutors did not discuss how they perceived training provided by aid organizations – a telling omission, as several instead highlighted the usefulness of trainings offered by refugee-led organizations.

While both men and women stressed the value of their self-organized savings groups, the opportunities arising herewith were particularly noted by the latter – especially because of gendered power asymmetries whereby men traditionally have control over financial resources. As members of such groups, women are able to benefit from the financial and social support provided, increasing their economic independence and decision-making power within their families and households.[54] Savings

52 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 June 2016, Kyaka II.

53 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 21 November 2016, Kyaka II.

54 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.

groups can therefore address some of the key structural barriers preventing women from accessing and controlling the necessary financial resources to live (more) independent lives in Uganda and elsewhere.

However, some people – and especially women – had insufficient money to contribute to savings groups, preventing them from accessing their support. This applied to one woman who had been living in Kampala for seven years at the time of our meeting. She first lived with people she already knew but soon started looking for ways to earn an income and secure her own place. This was by no means easy: "I move so much because sometimes you meet someone who says there is work here, [who] helps [you] and advises you to try. And you keep trying because we are looking for a better life." She explained that friends recommended she become part of a savings group, but she had to decline, noting, "I don't belong to a savings group. I don't know how to hustle to get the money for me to participate in the savings group. The living situation is not good."[55] Another woman mentioned how she had learned about a self-organized women's group from friends: "It's actually a savings group. They put money together so it can help them do something that can sustain them. I just heard of a group of women who come together and pool their money to help each other." Yet, she added that, "since I have no money, I have not bothered to go to them."[56]

These financial constraints reveal the paradox of savings groups: Although they are essentially self-organized social networks created to mitigate and serve as a buffer against risk, provide some capital, and contribute to improving livelihoods and lives, in order to join and stay in the groups, individuals must already possess some money. For some individuals, this represented a substantial obstacle. Such issues are not limited to savings groups, though. For example, some self-organizations require membership fees to be paid in order to access their services, or they charge individuals for participation in language classes, vocational training, support groups, and similar. Hence, the problems such services target are also the reason why some cannot take them up.

Despite these issues, the variety of experiences that interlocutors shared with us shows how they engage in individual and collective socio-economic practices within self-organized networks. These do

55 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 31 January 2017, Kampala.
56 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.

not arise by chance but are based on strategic choice; to obtain start-up capital, one person in Kyaka II accordingly said, "[w]e decided to come together and do something that could help us as refugees."[57] A member of a self-organization in Kampala similarly framed their economic activities and training as a strategic way "to help each other."[58] Hence, refugees' self-organizations ultimately represent a reactive strategy to counter challenges as well as a proactive one to improve conditions collectively.

Social Meanings of Refugees' Collective Economic Practices: Risk Mitigators, Experts, and Catalysts

The economic practices discussed here emphasize that refugees enter into negotiation processes and pursue key resources to improve their lives autonomously via social self-organization, their own experiences, and existing knowledges, despite and beyond humanitarian regulations and restrictions. To better understand the relational aspects and social meanings of individuals' and self-organizations' economic strategies, we now explore how people gain and share vital knowledges, support each other, and mitigate risks in times of need, in addition to how well-established individual practices influence the possibilities of others and how successful ones can become catalysts. This resonates with the agentic concept of "pioneers" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1009), individuals who can prompt the emergence of new contexts and strategies for action. However, such an emergence of novel action occurs not only via role-modelling possibilities but also by supporting others, providing a buffer against hardships, and mitigating consequences through their own ways of self-organizing.

While the roles of experts, risk mitigators, and reinforcing catalysts are closely intertwined, we separate them analytically and discuss each one in turn in the following sections. Per the relational approach to agency, we show how shared routines can be maintained but also discarded or alternatively adapted to changing circumstances. By their social embeddedness, individuals ultimately act beyond their own close environment or economic interests in contributing to the related

57 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with two women and three men, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

58 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala.

opportunities of others too, especially through self-organizations. This analysis inherently links with the information Isreal Katembo shared about KITAD, KRLON, vocational trainings, and business entrepreneurship in his reflection at the beginning of this chapter.

Individuals and Self-Organizations as Risk Mitigators

The importance of self-organized support by and for refugees is particularly evident in emergencies. In the previous chapter, we saw how it is primarily other refugees who act as first responders and providers given that newly arriving refugees often find themselves with little to no support until the administrative processes of registration and refugee status determination have been concluded. As such, they rely on others for handouts and shared insights to cope with the challenging conditions encountered in exile. Hence, displaced people already living in Uganda give shelter, food, and sometimes jobs to newcomers, guide them through the necessary aid procedures, and offer information about practical matters of everyday life.

Yet, the importance of mitigating risks is by no means limited to the time of arrival; it encompasses everyday life in exile more broadly, with self-organized assistance being offered on a continuous basis. In a discussion with a group of women, one interlocutor hence explained, "when there is harvesting season, you can give out some food for the hungry. If there is someone sick [who] has no money for medication, you can give them some money so they can buy the drugs."[59] Such supportive statements were shared by many interlocutors, including one woman who emphasized the role of belonging to and solidarity within the community: "If one [person] is sick, every one of us does what they are able to do for that person. For us, a stranger, as long as they are Somali, can come to your door, knock, and you let them in to share your food and have a place to rest. We are [a] community."[60]

It is certainly important to recognize and acknowledge such solidarity and spontaneous or long-term mutual support. However, it is equally vital not to generalize and portray all people who have experienced displacement as selfless helpers. Not all interlocutors were or wanted to be part of a seemingly natural solidarity system, as one

59 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

60 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kampala.

woman in Kyaka II made clear: "It is not everybody who does that. There are also people who have much, but they don't give anything."[61] Since those who provide vital support do not always act altruistically but perhaps also pursue their own interests and objectives, we approach them not as helpers but as *risk mitigators*.

Refugees' economic strategies represent an important example of how support for others outside of the collective can emerge that may not be intentional and/or altruistic, but that nonetheless carries meaning for them. For instance, other individuals can make a difference by providing labour, renting out their houses, and establishing their very own economic practices, which can become essential for others too. One everyday example is the small shops bringing key goods such as soap for those of limited mobility in Kyaka II.[62] Hence, when individuals act as unintentional risk mitigators, their interests often correlate with the needs or interests of others. Through their temporal advance, they provide important infrastructures for others – for instance, by offering work in exchange for food. This is also the case for people who have been living in Kyaka II or Kampala for a while and own farmland or businesses that need to be cultivated or further supported, thus requiring additional hands – and some see the newly arriving as "cheap labour."[63] Due to the limited options, they frequently take up such offers, and while doing so, interaction occurs and individuals learn about local conditions.

The intersection between providing for one's own interests and supporting others can also be seen in the practice of granting loans among individuals. Start-up capital is indispensable for founding enterprises, yet refugees face great challenges procuring such resources in Uganda given the legal restrictions that regularly foreclose formal credit options. Similar to the findings of other studies (e.g., Jacobsen 2005; Kaiser 2006), in Kampala and Kyaka II it became clear that refugees have to rely primarily on informal sponsors. While this often takes the form of shopkeepers offering credit, individuals can also access seed capital and emergency funding through savings groups that lend money. Though the interest rates involved differ, some are

61 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 November 2016, Kyaka II.
62 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 14 June 2017, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.
63 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.

as high as 20 per cent; as such, this should not be mistaken for altruism. Nevertheless, these strategies reveal the mutual support playing out, illuminating how refugees – even without altruistic intentions – become risk mitigators for other refugees. Economically more successful individuals function as gatekeepers, so that they can evolve into informal banking systems inside the camp.

While having land, businesses, connections, or other material and immaterial goods is not necessarily an indicator of the willingness to support others, interlocutors certainly revealed how the lack of owned resources negatively affects a person's fundamental capacities to cope with presenting issues and to help others. The latter puts enormous strain on already limited resources. A group of elderly men told us that their cultural identity is characterized by maintaining "mapendo," which means love in Swahili and is thus indicative of mutual care.[64] Due to the lack they experience in the camp, however, they cannot always maintain this way of being. With aid in the camp being repeatedly downsized over time, while limitations and challenges remain and even intensify, the question arises as to how these reductions will affect refugees' own practices of assistance and whether they can continue to live true to their ideals.

Individuals and Self-Organizations as Experts and Sources of Information

As is true worldwide, the longer one is in a certain environment, the better one comes to understand it. This is also the case for displaced people in Kampala and Kyaka II. Over time, individuals gain and deepen situated knowledges about the conditions, regulations, structures, and dynamics on-site. Such everyday knowledge reflects "particular knowledge that is local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity" (Foucault [1997] 2004, 7–8). Refugees thus become experts of these situations. Due to the distinct and changing circumstances of exile, their knowledges are self-defined, essential to their coping and survival and helping them to counter and surpass the restrictive system imposed on them (see also Collins 2000, 100).

Refugees not only use their knowledges for their own benefit but also pass them on to others – directly and intentionally as well as indirectly and rather unintentionally – thereby driving change for

64 Men from DR Congo, discussion, 6 December 2016, Kyaka II.

themselves and others. This corresponds with the work of Shivakoti and Milner (2022) about localized knowledge ecosystems; they focus on a network of diverse actors, including individuals with lived experiences of displacement, researchers, and practitioners, creating new knowledges to affect change and bring about the betterment of displaced people (2022, 821).

Following the approach to situated bits of knowledge by Elorduy (2021, 20), our research further reveals how people receive, use, share, and advance knowledges in specific localized social surroundings. This reflects especially how gaining crucial information facilitates their everyday lives in many ways – including in terms of improved economic opportunities. Many interlocutors emphasized how vital it was for them to learn from others and gain particular insights, whether about humanitarian regulations, the asylum process and their rights, how to farm, where to find markets or aid organizations' offices, how to manage a business, where to seek emergency help, or what networks to draw on. This starts with the time of flight, arriving in Uganda, and deciding where to go before continuing to play out throughout life in exile – as is the case for non-displaced people too. One woman explained how aid agencies fail to share information or sufficient aid, standing in contrast to self-organized support: "As Congolese, we share information among each other. We tell people where to get food, how to access medical [services], where to go to find people, most especially for newly arriving people."[65] Such knowledge sharing is especially relevant for people's economic practices, as one man stressed: "Of course, you have to learn from friends how to run a business. I started with rearing chickens. I bought two hundred small chickens for 1,600 [Ugandan shillings] in Kampala. There was a friend of mine who is a driver. He told me how to rear them. When they got big, I sold them. That is how I got my first money."[66]

Beyond accessing one's social connections, there are also structured approaches to sharing information – for instance, as part of formalized refugee-led organizations. A key example is KITAD. As Isreal Katembo explained earlier, KITAD pursues "the aim of sensitizing communities and disseminating information about rights to new and old refugees, where to access different service providers, how and when to report any breach of rights and laws." Hence, its prime objective is to share

65 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala.
66 Man from Rwanda, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

knowledges – not only to prevent risks from arising but also to inform people proactively about rights and opportunities. This also applies to the recent initiative of building an online entrepreneurship business curative program linking five camps and seeking to improve displaced people's economic prospects.

Women especially stressed time and again that generating their own income was important to maintain their independence.[67] One interlocutor thus highlighted, "[b]usiness is the first priority for women!"[68] The focus many women place on gaining their own income is rooted not least in patriarchal gender relations. As noted in earlier chapters, men are primarily understood as providers and decision makers, occupying dominant social roles, while women are mainly seen in subordinate roles in which they are responsible for domestic care work and expected to obey. This heavily limits women's economic opportunities. However, by earning their own income, women are able to reduce their dependency and thus exert a greater degree of control over their futures. To pursue strategies to earn money, women pass on knowledges, such as how to run a shop, provide services (e.g., hair braiding), or produce goods for trade (e.g., bracelets or alcohol).[69] Hence, they learn from the expertise of individuals and self-organized collectives. Interlocutors repeatedly stressed the importance of securing sufficient financial means as a way to overcome domestic strife and provide for one's family.[70] Since such conflict – and, with it, domestic violence – is prevalent in Kampala and Kyaka II (see chapter 5; see also Morof et al. 2014; Naggujja et al. 2014; Kwiringira et al. 2018; Krause 2021), sharing information is crucial of their own and collective support.[71]

67 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.

68 Woman from DR Congo, discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II.

69 E.g., discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II.

70 E.g., discussion with six men and five women, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II; discussion with six women, 23 November 2016, Kyaka II.

71 E.g., woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 5 December 2016, Kyaka II.

However, sharing and receiving information can also be complicated – not least because of the many different languages people speak. One woman explained how her friendship circle consists of women from different countries who support each other in Kyaka II. They also came up with an idea for an agricultural group but failed due to insufficient funds. She added that co-operation is difficult as not everyone can readily communicate with others: "Sharing knowledge is not easy because people are from different areas. So. if you tell something, others might not understand it, and they say, 'This one is proud.'"[72] Hence, taking the time to share knowledges and translate ideas in ways that are understandable in one's social surroundings is crucial.

People also strategically look for insights and skills as well as engage with certain collectives to broaden their knowledge base. For example, interlocutors in Kampala described their challenging start in the city and their desire to live independently, including by attaining a degree of economic autonomy. Some thus used the support offered by formalized self-organizations, such as assistance in learning English and Luganda "to break the language barrier"[73] and make them more likely to find employment. Self-organizations' translation services and sensitization programs serve such aims too. This is evident in the work of KITAD, which first set out to provide translations of legal, political, and humanitarian information to refugees – thus representing a specific form of institutionalized knowledge sharing.

The vocational training offered by many formalized self-organizations is another prominent example. Many interlocutors explained that they had enrolled in programs teaching tailoring, computing, and similar skills, or pursued higher education, to increase their chances of finding work and earning enough to live comfortably. Their decision was not only about gaining education, skills, and knowledge, however, but also allowed individuals to connect with others. As one woman explained, "[I go to] associate with the others there that are my own age. This way, I do not feel alone, and seeing others with similar problems really strengthens me."[74]

Just as risk-mitigating activities are not always intentionally adopted or in pursuit of altruistic ends, refugees do not always consciously assume expert roles. Especially in emergencies, sharing

72 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
73 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala.
74 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.

information can be a business for some people. One example is the many pharmacies in Kyaka II that provide medical advice and support beyond what Uganda's often hard-to-access hospitals can offer in the camp and the city.

Moreover, beyond the conscious sharing of knowledges, the rather indirect copying of successful business models is also of relevance here, as it can contribute to the available "repertoire" of agentic action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980). Hence, one example of unconsciously or unintentionally sharing knowledges and engaging in collective support is when one's business ideas are successful and subsequently reproduced by others. A man who started planting trees in Kyaka II shared how others soon started following his lead: "They were even surprised that I went to them seeking to plant trees because other refugees had refused to do it. But now it is different, because now the others are also planting. They have seen me getting some money out of the trees."[75] In Kampala such successful business models also include restaurants offering specific cuisines, setting up saloons in certain areas, or tailoring services.

Due to people's individual economic strategies, a collective system emerges vis-à-vis sharing knowledges, mitigating risks, and ultimately closing gaps in the humanitarian regime. This is partially intentional through solidarity and knowledge transfer, but it can also be inadvertent by merely highlighting potential opportunities for others to earn more. In this way, displaced people collectively cope with the challenging daily circumstances they find themselves in. However, the paradox here is that by becoming experts in coping with their current situation, they ultimately also reproduce a humanitarian strategy that transfers responsibility to refugees without effecting structural change in the problematic aid framework.

Individuals, Self-Organizations, and Socio-Economic Practices as Catalysts

Economic practices work according to market logic in increasing supply and demand. Not least through the infrastructures thus emerging, refugees promote and develop more active economic environments in urban and camp contexts alike. In Kampala, this is especially visible in their own restaurants, markets, boutiques, hairdressers, or

75 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kyaka II.

in the selling of handmade items on the street. In Kyaka II, this can become more difficult due to the camp's remote location and humanitarian governance; nevertheless, markets arise where refugees sell both locally developed and imported goods as well as offer key services. A Ugandan woman thus remarked,

> Living with the refugees [in Kyaka II] has been mostly very good. It has benefited us so much. For example, the Bukere market – the refugees founded it. It was brought by the first batch of refugees … I think they came over here in the 1980s; when they left, it collapsed. When the ones that are present returned, the market became functional again. It is not that the market was not operating. It was. It is just that it was not powerful. The strength of that market comes from the refugees.[76]

In fact, the camp's trading centre generates the largest tax revenue for the whole of Kygegwa District (Danish Refugee Council 2018, 7). Writing in the early 2000s, Jacobsen had already described camps as "hubs of economic activities," explaining how "[r]efugees move out into the surrounding community to pursue trade and seek employment, and locals enter the camp in search of cheap labor, business opportunities, and investment" (2005, 34). While humanitarian measures can have some supportive effects through provided – and appropriated – assistance, the revelation of one aid worker we spoke with, similar to the findings of Alloush and colleagues (2017), was telling: namely, that the change from distributing food to money was a catalyst for refugees' economic practices, expanding local markets "massively."[77] However, for other residents of Kyaka II humanitarian measures remain minor, insufficient, or irrelevant – and for most, they are limiting, which is why they required their own economic strategies. Such vibrant and multi-faceted markets in camps are born out of pure necessity, creating economic interactions that are necessary due to the restrictions and precarities that shape camps such as Kyaka II worldwide.

Yet, central here is how refugees' own strategies affect their socio-economic environments and turn into reinforcing catalysts for further such practices. People create spaces of opportunity for themselves,

76 Woman from Uganda, dialogue, 6 December 2016, Kyaka II.
77 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 6 December 2016, Kyaka II.

and their lucrative strategies may in turn serve as inspiration for others. Aside from copying successful business models, people develop opportunities when, for example, offering employment to other refugees in agriculture, hair salons, or other contexts. Thus, economically successful individuals and self-organizations occasionally function as employers and thereby create earning potential for others. While interlocutors in Kyaka II tended to note employment by refugees and Ugandans, those in Kampala mostly worked for other refugees in restaurants, hair salons, or similar enterprises.

One woman who sold groceries and meat in Kampala also ran a small business: "I dye Somali ladies for decoration. It's called henna." She explained that it was going very well, so she hired two women to work with her.[78] Another woman described working for a Somali business; she receives fashion items such as shirts and dresses, moving "door to door selling second-hand clothes." She said the business owners "trust me and I help them sell and make a profit." Moreover, she noted that she first met them through her neighbour, who had recommended her.[79]

Some formalized self-organizations that are able to generate sufficient resources via membership fees or external support can function as employers and reinforcing catalysts too. In Kampala, a number of people we met were involved in YARID for example. Since it is growing and has been receiving external funding for some time now, this self-organization is able to employ staff on a fairly regular basis. Although such international funding represents a rare case in our research, a few other self-organizations also offered employment to some staff primarily through the fees that members pay. However, most representatives also rued how they struggle to make enough money to pay their staff. This was, for instance, described by the leading figure in the Savings and Credit Co-Operative Society in Kyaka II, who also received a small salary from the aid organization. Yet, the transport costs within the camp alone would use it up, so he ultimately did not receive financial compensation for his work. As a consequence, he described how difficult it was to retain sufficient staff numbers for the work his self-organization was striving to do.[80]

With many of the formalized self-organizations providing vocational training, they hence strategically act as reinforcing catalysts. This

78 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
79 Woman from Somalia, dialogue, 12 November 2016, Kampala.
80 Anonymous.

training focuses not only on economic but also social well-being, which is particularly evident in the link to arts, crafts, and psychosocial support. Whereas in Kyaka II, self-organizations coexist with aid organizations that themselves provide a certain degree of skills training, the latter offers are rare in Kampala. There, interlocutors referred to refugees' self-organizations as the sole places to access such learning opportunities. The catalyst value of refugee-led organizations corresponds with the research of Lau (2021), who explores refugee community organizations and other relevant actors in Hong Kong. Her focus is on the broader support structures in place – and not primarily socio-economic practices. However, her research also shows how refugees' own organizations provide vital support and thus contribute to their empowerment. She finds that refugee community organizations "adopt the roles of Catalyst, Facilitator, Ally and Advocate" (Lau 2021, 317).

Beyond such training, information and knowledge travel and come to constitute an important catalyst for people's economic endeavours. While some described how they developed strategies of income generation not only by trial and error but especially based on knowledges gained previously in their countries of origin, like tailoring or selling goods, this was not possible for others due to a lack of resources or formal qualifications. Conversation partners also explained how other refugees showed them the best markets in Kampala,[81] or provided contacts for trading goods such as chitenge.[82] This can be based on sharing skills, as with the women who told us that they had learned hairdressing, sewing, and business management from their friends.[83] Inspiration from one's social contacts is often relevant, as one shopkeeper described: "Of course, you talk to others [about] how you can live. And I was near to people with business. I asked them how they did their business, and they told me you do this and that. Also, before I was starting [my shop], there was a friend of mine who was a businessman. So I went to his home to see how he does his business. So he tried to teach me how to do business."[84]

Hence refugees' economic practices are interwoven and mutually inform one another. It is especially their orientation toward the future

81 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 19 November 2016, Kyaka II.
82 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 November 2016, Kyaka II.
83 E.g., woman, DR Congo, dialogue, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II; woman, DR Congo, dialogue, 15 November 2016, Kyaka II.
84 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

that characterizes these endeavours. Pioneers pass on relevant knowledges, while groups promote social benefits – both serving as catalysts, ultimately, for greater livelihoods.

RISKY SOCIO-ECONOMIC PRACTICES: LACK OF RIGHTS, LYING, THEFT, SURVIVAL SEX

Much of the discussion in this chapter so far has revolved around refugees' collective strategies to navigate the challenging circumstances of everyday life in exile. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that individuals often have little to no choice than to self-organize, to work with and support each other socio-economically to ensure at least a certain level of livelihood. While this applies to many in Uganda, including nationals, the refugee regime imposes additional challenges, regulations, and restrictions on refugees. These involve restrictions on mobilities, the arduous process of applying for working permits, as well as the sheer impossibility of accessing credit via formal banking systems due to refugees' legal status – to name just a few.

Jacobsen hence argues that refugees employ "a wide range of survival strategies. Though faced with economic deprivation and marginalization, many refugees maintain their cultural practices and values, join and form communities, and meet all manner of livelihood challenges in new and familiar ways" (2005, 3). Her reference to "survival strategies" is expressive in and of itself as it stresses how precarious the situation is for many people in exile worldwide – Uganda included. For many, as noted above, displacement means living from hand to mouth. By highlighting how refugees navigate the acute challenges they face every day, it is important not to fall into the trap of downplaying the precarious economic practices to which some people must resort and the attendant risks that arise therefrom. Since their socio-economic practices are inherently intertwined with, and oftentimes result from, such precarities, we conclude this chapter by analyzing the perilous pathways that some have to traverse in the absence of safe, viable alternatives.

Dangerous and Unsustainable Work Environments

Refugees' individual and collective economic endeavours can come with a wide range of risks. Earlier, one woman narrated how she suffered an acid attack while working in a store. Her injuries were

extensive, as the scars on her face revealed. While we did not cross paths with anyone else who had experienced such an attack, other interlocutors did address a number of additional risks they were exposed to while at work. These included, for example, accidents on the road when transporting goods, their wares being stolen, as well as being harassed by colleagues, employers, customers, random people, and/or the police.[85] Particularly for women, this can start at home when their husbands feel like they are losing their dominant social position and status due to their wives' income;[86] increased public exposure via their activities is, however, also notable here. One young woman who works at a market stand spoke about gender-based violence in the form of the sexual harassment she encountered from men. She always worked with other women to increase revenue and protect each other, yet she also noted that "[t]he problem is that when you are walking here, men [pick] on you and they touch you, and this makes me very uncomfortable. In [DR] Congo there was no such a thing. No one taps on your bum, but here when you complain, they abuse you. So I just have to pass by and be quiet."[87] Such experiences were shared by several women working in shops or markets in Kampala. While self-organized partnerships with others could somewhat increase the chances of preventing sexual assault and provide individuals with mutual support when such assault does occurs, these risks nonetheless remain widespread. Keeping quiet, as this woman noted, becomes a coping strategy (see also Thomson 2013), while women use spaces of trust they establish to potentially talk about such experiences too.

One man spoke, meanwhile, about a restaurant in Kampala he ran and how he employed other refugees because he could trust them. He explained that they face a range of issues such as theft, harassment, and physical violence on-site. He recalled one incident in which a woman came to his restaurant, ordered food, and then declined to pay at the end, verbally harassing his employees for being refugees. The woman even "entered in the kitchen and used her hands to pick

85 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II.

86 Women from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

87 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 January 2017, Kampala.

[out] some pieces of meat from the saucepan." Afterwards, "the woman ran to the police" to have him arrested for harassing her. The man was still in disbelief at what had happened: "This restaurant was a source of [earning for] the school fees of my three children, and that is where they were getting food from."[88] He thus worried about his own safety and that of his employees.

In Kyaka II, many people described how they had experienced conflict over the distribution of land. With many new people arriving in the camp at the time of research, OPM partly redistributed plots it had earlier assigned to others, or it just encroached on the land of others over time. With people primarily relying on the harvest in the camp, competition over land can become fierce, even among agricultural collectives that join forces in pursuit of greater yields. As a consequence, some described how they had left their assigned plots after having been threatened with violence. One woman hence stressed that "conflicts [arise] over resources. Because resources are scarce." Tensions would also emerge when "goats go in someone else's garden, or, for example, you are having children and they cut the maize of someone else's garden, and then that person comes and accuses the parents."[89] The extent of the violence potentially ensuing was explained by a man whose wife was at one point accused of stealing after a long-running feud between neighbours over scarce resources eventually escalated: "After she reported to Bujubuli [police station], the neighbours gave money to a drunkard who came in the night abusing her and with a *panga* [machete] opened the door. You know our doors are only secured with a nail, so if you come with a *panga* and you push the nail up you can enter. So he entered and took the money. But he didn't cut anyone. He just took the money."[90] The family feared further attacks and had to move to a safe shelter provided by aid organizations.

Others noted how the difficulty of agricultural work affected their health, particularly if they had previous injuries. One person shared how his lasting wounds from the torture he experienced during the war in DR Congo got worse with digging.[91] Many people furthermore complained how exhausting farming was, how little they were able to produce, how they did not have enough to survive on, and how

88 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala.
89 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
90 Man from DR Congo, dialogue 19 June 2017, Kyaka II.
91 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

much they worried about themselves and their families. These issues often continue in agricultural collectives, although co-operation provides some solace. As one interlocutor noted, "I cannot say that we manage [to get] food every day. There is a day when you can go hungry. When we had just arrived here, we used to get food; they would give us soya flour, beans, cooking oil, but now they reached a [certain] point, and they stopped giving us the food assistance. So now one can even sleep hungry, and stay hungry the next day too."[92] Having to take one's children out of school and the significant consequences of such a decision, portrayed as a collective problem, was noted by one woman from Rwanda among others: "Before, if you [had] enough land, it would be better and you could sell some things and [pay for] things like clothes, school fees, etc. But now I cannot send my kids to school anymore. This is not only a problem in our family but in the whole community."[93]

While we have quoted such feelings of anxiety repeatedly throughout the book's pages, these words are particularly revealing of how a supposedly humanitarian environment can furnish dangerous surroundings for refugees to live and work in. Since the conditions are so tense for some people that they can hardly take care of their children, some have to take the decision to leave them with friends or relatives. Hence, they have to break up their most fundamental self-organized collective in the pursuit of economic income – survival even. This was the case for the woman just quoted. She highlighted time and again how "I would love to stay with all my children," but ultimately had to leave: "It is only out of [a] lack of possibilities." She described being unable to support her children as overwhelming for her.[94]

Interlocutors who stated that they were employed rarely earned sufficient income to live, let alone enjoy the benefits of health care, accident insurance, retirement provisions, or in fact any access to their rights as workers. This was the case regardless of whether their employers were Ugandans, refugees, or even aid organizations. One may argue that this is a broader issue in Uganda, where worker protection, employment benefits, and access to related rights are inadequate, and thus not just a problem for the displaced (e.g., Keene-Mugerwa 2016; Nabuuma 2017; Muldoon et al. 2017; Kiconco et

92 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 16 June 2017, Kyaka II.
93 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.
94 Woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II.

al. 2019). Refugees' employment conditions, however, are further complicated and undermined by their restrictive legal status.

This causes a variety of problems. The vast majority of people we spoke with engage in agriculture, run small-scale businesses, and/or are informally employed in short-term work. Due to the limited options available, many have to take economic offers that are prone to exploitation or extremely underpaid – sometimes people even receive not money but food in return for their labour. Interlocutors mentioned these chronic issues particularly when speaking of newcomers obliged to work for other refugees or Ugandans in the fields. There is thus potentially an exploitative side to collectives too. Erel (2015), in focusing on migrant women from Turkey in Germany at the intersection of migration, social networks, gender, and capital, similarly discusses how they mobilize capital for the projects they seek to pursue. She underscores how social networks are not merely or primarily supportive but instead "can be highly exploitative, with workers being paid below the minimum wage, working in unhealthy or unsafe conditions without workplace and social security. In addition, these networks can reinforce sexist practices" (Erel 2015, 22).

Most interlocutors in Uganda are stuck in the informal economy. Very few were able to secure formal employment, but even those who did often struggled with unsustainable work, short-term contracts (such as those provided by aid organizations), and the accompanying risks. As a result, displaced people are confronted with immense problems in terms of finding sustainable and safe forms of employment, ones in which they are protected, enjoy access to their rights as workers, and are provided opportunities for their future thriving.

Dangerous Economic Practices

Refugees are under pressure to find ways to move forward, even more so when they are directly responsible for the well-being of their families. As a result, some do not see any alternative other than to engage in dangerous practices such as lying, theft, and sex work. First, the various structural burdens they experience can also contribute to individuals having to lie about their identity to access opportunities that would otherwise be impossible for them to grasp. One young woman in Kampala said that she was in dire need of assistance because she had no income at all, recalling that "[w]hen we [had] just arrived here, fellow Congolese advised me to lie about things, like, 'My

parents were beheaded in cold blood and they were shooting at me … blah blah,' but I don't like to lie. I made a choice that I was not going to lie. I don't like to tell lies. Other people exaggerate the situation to get assistance or a job. I will try hard on my own, and I am sure I will manage."[95] Others mentioned that they had to hide their nationality or share other false information to access social services, apply for educational scholarships, or find sources of income. Cheating, lying, or sharing certain information strategically has been discussed in the literature as a form of coping (Kibreab 2004; Jansen 2008; Ikanda 2018). It essentially means that those concerned cannot uphold their true identity and have to hide instead (see also Krause 2021, 224–5).

Second, no one we spoke to noted being involved in theft, but several people did mention having witnessed it or having personally experienced others stealing from them. In Kampala, it was hence stated that there are "very many cases of theft"[96] in the area, and that "neighbours sometimes steal our stuff,"[97] referring to other refugees and Ugandans. Among the things taken were not only everyday goods such as food, cleaning materials, and electronic devices such as televisions and phones, but especially also trade items such as handmade jewelry or chitenge that the victims were planning to sell.[98] This also occurs in self-organized social collectives, as when friends who were first thought to be a safety net in fact turned out to be dangerous. One woman thus shared how a friend had entered her home while she was gone and stole many things from her (see chapter 5).[99]

Such episodes also happen in Kyaka II. It was explained that people would "steal goats and pigs,"[100] break into businesses such as shops and take everyday items and especially food,[101] or that others "rob

95 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 20 January 2017, Kampala.
96 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala.
97 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala; man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
98 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 10 November 2016, Kampala; man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, discussion with three women and two men, 23 June 2017, Kampala.
99 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala.
100 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 December 2017, Kyaka II.
101 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 13 November 2016, Kyaka II.

people and maybe even kill someone to [acquire] money."[102] One man noted that such theft was carried out primarily by those unable to engage in agriculture, stating, "I do understand when they are elderly people or sick. They end up stealing."[103] He added that "young boys" who wander around and do not find employment may also steal – an issue stressed by a number of interlocutors sin both the camp and the city.[104] These "young boys" sometimes form informal collectives or self-organize more concretely in groups with established hierarchies; practices of theft can hereby become an economic routine to secure livelihoods. These issues are acknowledged in communities, and groups have emerged seeking to prevent such developments, most notable being the Rendezvous Youth Group in Kampala, addressed in the previous chapter.[105] Moreover, in cases of theft, some self-organized collective support for those who have lost their goods and livelihoods becomes crucial, providing much-needed assistance. Nevertheless, those affected still have to rebuild their livelihoods and deal with the resulting stress.

Also in Kyaka II, community members sought to collectively avert danger, as one man recounted, "[w]e are endeavouring to teach them ways of behaviour and how to work. We also teach them to ask someone instead of stealing. We are also teaching them about the dangers involved with this behaviour, because they may one day steal from someone, and that person will find them and [cut] them in[to] pieces with a *panga*." In the course of our dialogue, he later referred to the fundamental issue with agriculture: "The problem we have [is that] those [who] have land, they cannot even use it. … We advise them to work for others and get money for themselves. Keep the money and buy, like, a garden from those that are leaving. They can then have food for that season, and they can plant a garden the following season for their own consumption."[106]

Finally, some people are at high risk of having to exchange sex for food or money, or having to enter into sex work or engage in survival sex due to the limited economic opportunities available to them. In

102 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 24 November 2016, Kyaka II.
103 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2017, Kyaka II.
104 E.g., man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 December 2016, Kyaka II; woman from Rwanda, dialogue, 20 November 2016, Kyaka II; man from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala.
105 Anonymous.
106 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2017, Kyaka II.

Kampala, a number of interlocutors cautiously hinted at being forced into sex for favours – namely, in exchange for accommodation or food. Others mentioned having to engage in sex work. Among them was a woman who had fled DR Congo with her husband and five children a year before we met. She explained the challenges in Kampala of not finding employment even though she was well trained and had a university degree, as did her husband. She confided that she would "try to avoid prostitution; it can lead to STDs." But after a long pause, she noted the many hardships of everyday life and indicated that she had, in consequence, little other choice. Yet, sometimes she and her husband were able to "borrow from friends for food, and some shops can give us things on credit so that we can pay later."[107]

A young woman explained that after her landlord kept increasing her rent, she and her children became homeless. Finding employment was difficult, even more so after she fell ill. She said she had to engage in "survival sex work" because she had no alternative.[108] Others similarly stated that "[p]eople go into prostitution because life is not easy. We take on anything to survive."[109] This was noted to be the case especially for women.[110] In Kyaka II (see also Krause 2021, 51–3, 216–18), likewise, one man explained that particularly when the harvest is not enough, "women here could sometimes become a prostitute to get some money to feed the family. Even the children can engage in prostitution."[111] These statements reflect how the problem of insufficient livelihoods and the dangerous practices arising therefrom affect individuals across all age groups and cause diverse risks.

Such livelihood endeavours are widespread but rarely discussed as socio-economic strategies in forced migration studies. Scholars instead primarily address the apparently *creative* or *innovative* strategies people develop to cope with the various difficulties faced in exile. However, in so doing, there is a risk of producing biased perspectives. It is important to consider and shed light on the different practices – including dangerous ones – involved so as to generate more nuanced insight into and comprehensive understanding of the diverse challenges

107 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
108 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 7 July 2017, Kampala.
109 Woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 21 November 2016, Kampala.
110 Man from Burundi, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 22 November 2016, Kampala; man from DR Congo, dialogue, 9 November 2016, Kampala.
111 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 17 November 2016, Kyaka II.

and opportunities that refugees face. Only some studies have done this to date, however (e.g., Jacobsen 2005; Naggujja et al. 2014; Bartolomei 2015; Pittaway 2015; Williams et al. 2018).

How life in limbo – as it has been described in the scholarship for decades now – affects the people concealed behind the homogenizing label of refugee is hence key, and it is a matter of acknowledging that individuals are sometimes left with few other options than to use risky strategies or engage in problematic informal employment to survive.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to the widespread idea of Uganda as a global model of how to host refugees, especially because of the economic opportunities refugees supposedly have due to their being given access to land for farming (for examples in the media, see Byaruhanga 2016), this chapter has reflected on the far-reaching problems that displaced people face as well as how they seek to deal with them. Self-organized socio-economic practices and strategies are crucial, which the reflections shared by Isreal Katembo about KITAD, KRLON, and business entrepreneurship illustrate. In addition to individual actions, social networks gain particular importance in providing access to resources, sharing information, and offering assistance in times of need. Their endeavours contribute to the emergence of social structures that both enable but partly also limit people's exercising of agency. Individuals' and self-organizations' economic strategies contribute to collective ones, providing a safety net in emergency situations as refugees become risk mitigators. Moreover, they and their self-organizations become experts in sharing crucial knowledges with others. Successful individuals and self-organizations furthermore serve as reinforcing catalysts, thereby creating opportunities for others too. In this way, individuals and their self-organizations contribute to a more varied economic landscape than the humanitarian one furnished by self-reliance based on agriculture. And even more, through these forms of self-organization they become the first responders in times of need as well as key providers in everyday life in exile.

Even though humanitarian support needs to be considered as a relevant factor in refugees' economic practices, in Kyaka II it was evident that the ongoing reductions in aid in particular caused people to take up and continue related coping strategies. The resulting gaps have to be filled by other refugees and self-organizations. This dynamic

is welcomed by aid organizations. For instance, when we asked a staff member what happens to those who do not fall into the category of people needing help but still cannot cater to their own needs, he immediately pointed out the support mechanisms of the "community."[112] While their important role for others and thus self-organized support is partially recognized individually (in terms of economic subsistence) and locally (as collective support) by political and aid personnel, such acknowledgment is lacking at the institutional level. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, formally treating refugees as actors in Uganda's refugee regime, ensuring that the assistance offered is based on one's own needs, interests, and competences, as well as including them in decision-making processes, all remain elusive. Instead, the acute challenges posed by the regime seem to be overlooked. Ironically enough, their coping and especially their complex economic endeavours via the self-organized and informal support mechanisms examined in this chapter are often framed as success stories in aid organizations' marketing initiatives.

Returning to our relational approach to agency per Emirbayer and Mische (1998), refugees' chosen practices hence contribute to a heterogeneous economic landscape that is based on social interaction and embedded in surrounding milieus. While the choice to adopt and use a particular economic strategy is an individual one, each person is still entangled in social routines, and their skills are often based on their own past and present experiences in seeking to create a better future. However, structural conditions can at times be so difficult that individuals see no other way than to engage in risky practices. Overall, to deal with and navigate the challenging conditions in exile, displaced people have to "experiment with practical strategies" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1009). Through their social entanglement and the diverse forms of self-organization they engage in, individuals adopt a set of practices that can evolve into collectively effective and impactful pioneering activities, as others learn and/or benefit from them (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1009). Hence, it is through the relational aspect of agency that these practices become transported and included in other people's repertoires, either by observing and learning or by providing and receiving support.

In the course of our research, people shared manifold experiences of failure and starting over again, often subsequently passing their

112 Aid worker, man from Uganda, interview, 10 July 2017, Kyaka II.

acquired expert knowledges on to others. Therefore, economic practices enable spaces of opportunity through and for refugees. This is particularly evident in how refugees' self-organizations offer trainings in specific skills that are relevant for the economic practices of others in their respective contexts. Hence, the various strategies people develop and employ are highly contextualized. People weigh up the limitations and possibilities of their current situations, learn from past experiences, as well as pursue their future aspirations. This social interwovenness ultimately shows how individuals contribute to their own protection and support, both individually as well as collectively.

7

Concluding Thoughts

On the Relevance of and Risks for Refugees' Self-Organization

What roles do refugees' self-organization play in everyday life in exile? This question has guided our research with refugees in Uganda's Kampala and Kyaka II, and our analysis in this book. The findings presented in the preceding chapters reflect the diverse difficulties, challenges, and uncertainties people encounter in exile as well as the meanings they ascribe to their collective endeavours. At its heart, the book has examined the various lived experiences of refugees in forming, leading, engaging in, using, and sometimes also refraining from self-organization. Their self-organization is not an exceptional undertaking limited to specific forms that occur only sporadically or in extraordinary circumstances; rather, it is multi-faceted and deeply embedded in displaced people's everyday lives in exile.

The writings of those closely affected by the harsh conditions in Uganda echo exactly that and highlight the complex challenges they face and the great relevance of their self-organization. In his poem *Just Because I'm a Refugee*, Bengekya Mugay Gédéon addresses the various challenges and uncertainties refugees experience in exile (chapter 3). These hardships are also key in the writing of Paul*, who shares his *Difficult Experiences of Displacement, Arrival, and Life in Uganda* (chapter 5). Focusing on the wide-ranging formalized support structures that refugees self-organize and provide, Noella Kabale writes about the *Refugee Entrepreneurship Association Limited (REAL)* (chapter 4), Janvier Hafasha about the *Hodari Foundation*, and the Director about an *LGBTQ+ Refugee-Led Organization*[1] (both

1 As reflected in chapter 1, research with LGBTQ+ refugees was exclusively conducted by Krause.

in chapter 5). Finally, Isreal Katembo shows how individuals create not only self-organizations but also networks when explaining *KITAD, KRLON, and Business Entrepreneurship* (chapter 6). We are profoundly grateful for all the discussions we have had and for being able to share their reflections in the book.

In this concluding chapter, we summarize and revisit the main research findings presented in the chapters and address avenues for further research. Moreover, we discuss contemporary developments concerning the increasing attention to refugee-led organizations, particularly linking it with the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is undoubtedly long past time for political and humanitarian actors to pay closer attention to refugees' self-organized efforts, we see risks in the neoliberal transfer of responsibility and tokenism. Yet, refugees and/in self-organizations challenge such tendencies, demand their voices to be heard, and advocate for their protection and rights both locally and globally.

RELEVANCE OF REFUGEES' SELF-ORGANIZATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE IN EXILE

The book has centred on refugees' lived experiences in, for, and through their self-organization in everyday life, which have led to six focus areas. Crucially, we have adopted a dual approach to self-organization to understand the dynamics in Kyaka II and Kampala: self-organization as practices of individuals engaging in collective activities, and as institutional entities that people found, lead, and use. This indicates the centrality, and relation, of individuals in collective actions. For the research, we have drawn on relational agency theory from gender-sensitive perspectives complemented by situated knowledges to focus on refugees' lived experiences and their actions for self-organization (see chapter 2). This framework has enabled us to pay careful attention to the interplay between individual agency and collective action, explore the deep social embeddedness of individuals and self-organization in their environments, and treat Uganda's refugee regime with its political, legal, humanitarian, social, and economic framework as contextual structures that surround and influence refugees' lives and self-organizing. Moreover, the framework has required that we not limit the research to specific forms of action but instead take seriously the range of informal to formalized self-organizations that interlocutors shared. Via their diverse self-organizations, individuals provide and receive support in

all areas of life, thus serving as key providers in everyday life as well as first responders in emergencies. However, individuals experience life in exile differently, and we have shown how social roles and gender power dynamics shape ways in which they self-organize and can access self-organized support.

Although praised as progressive, Uganda's refugee regime poses various restrictions for refugees. We showed in chapter 3 that the existing hierarchical structures and policies define and dictate refugees' participation and thereby constrain how individuals practise their agency. Whereas the policy focus on self-reliance seems to offer refugees space for building livelihoods and pursuing relatively independent lives, the reality is different. Government authorities and aid agencies set regulations for refugees' lives, participation, and also self-organization. The latter is crucial as self-organizations are made an integral part of the regime by orchestrating participation and instrumentalizing refugee groups as tools to serve the aid apparatus and policy objectives. These novel insights reveal how the authorities impose, leverage, and partly exploit refugees' involvement under the umbrella of participatory approaches while maintaining the asymmetric relationship between those who provide and those who receive. However, as we discussed, this does not mean that people passively submit to the system; instead, they practise agency by incorporating the restricting structures into their expectations and thus their evaluation of conditions and adapt accordingly (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 979–81). They furthermore contest, circumvent, navigate, or also strategically use these structures for their benefit – practices for which their self-organizing is key. Our analysis therefore reveals how structures are (re)produced through relational interaction. While government authorities and aid agencies primarily produce these structures, refugees' actions – whether through formal or informal self-organizations – work to reinforce, challenge, or adapt the structures. As such, the relational approach helps illuminate the interaction between structural limitations and individual agency, enabling a nuanced understanding of how refugees manoeuvre, resist, or even reshape humanitarian and political landscapes in subtle or also obvious ways.

The various ways in which individuals manoeuvre, challenge, surpass, and actively resist such control are especially evident in their collective actions of self-organizing. They demonstrate agency not only through reactive strategies, where individuals collectively navigate

and cope with the various challenges and restrictions, but also through proactive strategies, wherein they build lives and livelihoods as they wish and see fit. Formalized self-organizations that individuals set up and lead are crucial here. In contrast to refugee groups that are influenced by political and aid actors, the self-organizations function independently but partly co-operate with these actors. We show in chapter 4 how formalized self-organizations offer a wide range of services that other refugees need in Kyaka II and Kampala. Their support includes providing legal advice on asylum procedures, assisting with arrival and integration, arranging accommodation, promoting gender equality, tackling gender-based violence, advising on access to services like education and medical care, organizing language courses, offering skills and vocational training, maintaining savings groups and loan schemes, and providing psychosocial counselling and self-help groups. This highlights the routines they jointly create and offer, and the extensive "repertoire" they use in order to manoeuvre, as relevant for relational agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980). In light of these complex support systems, formalized self-organizations represent actors in Uganda's refugee regime, but they are not (yet) recognized as such by government authorities and aid organizations.

While our focus in this chapter has been on formalized self-organizations and the roles of displaced individuals, future research should broaden the scope to explore their interactions with other organizations. This includes examining how displaced people engage with civil society organizations alongside nationals, such as religious groups, LGBTQ+ organizations, and women's groups. Furthermore, research is needed to explore both collaborations and tensions between displaced people's self-organizations and these additional organizations. Such a broadened perspective would provide deeper insights into individuals' social integration and participation in societal dynamics, their approaches to navigating restrictions and marginalization in exile, as well as the potential institutional opportunities for strengthening advocacy efforts and improving access to resources.

Beyond such formalized self-organizations, our research showed that it is frequently the closest social collective that provides vital support in times of need as well as in everyday life. To comprehend the valuable role of refugees' self-organizing, it is important to consider the acute and traumatic experiences many have faced prior to and during life in exile. Having experienced conflict and displacement,

lost and been separated from family members and friends, and often endured many years of difficulties and uncertainties in protracted exile, initiating, joining, and taking part in self-organizations provides individuals with safety nets, spheres of belonging and trust, and sources of stability in everyday life. In light of these challenges and the restrictions imposed by Uganda's refugee regime, a man explained: "That word 'refugee' is making us come together."[2] As we reflected in chapter 5, refugees and their self-organization actively shape and influence the social structures around them and essentially establish and draw on the power of their own "community."[3] Their social embeddedness and joint strategies reflect the deeply relational nature of agency, practised both individually and collectively, while emphasizing the often mundane processes involved in organizing one's social environment. Hence, we shed light on the social and temporal relevance; actors draw upon past experiences and future aspirations, negotiating their actions within the dynamics of social interaction, framing agency as a forward-oriented process "toward something" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 973). For interlocutors in Kyaka II and Kampala, this often meant engaging in families, friendship circles, or other close social systems, providing, receiving, and fostering emotional and social well-being.

This social embeddedness requires further research attention to better understand how informal self-organizations, especially, emerge, extend beyond satisfying specific immediate needs, and ultimately reflect an inherent part of people's everyday lives and self-organized surroundings in exile. Incorporating a perspective on performativity is particularly relevant here to examine how these self-organizations are not only shaped through actions and practices but also actively produce and reproduce social norms, identities, and power relations. This lens highlights how everyday practices for and within self-organizations performatively create new social meanings and structures in exile. Additionally, intersectional research is necessary to unpack how various axes of identity – such as gender, ethnicity, legal status, and class – intersect to shape individuals' experiences of self-organization. This approach could deepen understandings of the differential opportunities

2 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 November 2017, Kyaka II.

3 E.g., woman from Somalia, dialogue, 11 November 2016, Kampala; woman from DR Congo, dialogue, 30 January 2017, Kampala.

and challenges people face, and how power dynamics influence both participation in and access to these self-organizations in everyday life.

Displaced people's actions also translate into socio-economic spheres as they self-organize and collaborate to improve livelihoods, share information, and act as risk mitigators, as examined in chapter 6. We outlined how individuals navigate economic challenges by engaging in diverse income-generating activities. These include operating small businesses, providing services, and especially self-organizing and participating in social and economic networks. These strategies not only offer some financial resilience but also reflect individuals' adaptability in leveraging available opportunities amid often restrictive conditions. Encountering obstacles to habitual practices can lead individuals to become "pioneers" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1009), reconstructing and innovating courses of action. The significance of such ways of exercising agency extends beyond them and their intended outcomes, encompassing collective effects that also benefit others and shape the social landscape. Individuals' economic actions rarely stand alone but instead are frequently entangled in collective ones that create crucial safety nets in emergencies. Individuals and self-organizations thus become risk mitigators. Via practices, they also turn into experts who share essential knowledges. Moreover, successful individuals and self-organizations serve as catalysts, creating opportunities that benefit broader groups. These efforts diversify the economic landscape beyond humanitarian models focused on agriculture, positioning self-organizations as first responders during crises and key providers in daily life in exile.

We highlighted the relevance of self-organizations as first responders and key providers throughout the book. However, informal self-organizations for economic or social means as well as formalized self-organizations do not necessarily reflect acts of solidarity and altruism. Nor do they imply that refugees naturally form a cohesive community; instead, individuals may pursue their own interests, and collectives can also become burdensome and even risky. The restrictive conditions encountered in exile force many individuals into a precarious hand-to-mouth existence and cause them to embrace informal economies, including agriculture, small businesses, or short-term labour. They often have little legal protection and face potential exploitation of low wages and unsafe conditions. Some are compelled to engage in dangerous survival strategies like theft, lying, or sex work due to extreme economic pressures. While informal and formalized

self-organizations frequently seek to provide support, they can also be exclusionary. Savings groups, for example, serve to provide stability through the collective, but some financial means are necessary to join them, which was not the case for some interlocutors who thus could not join (see chapter 6). Moreover, formalized self-organizations are often confronted with insufficient funding, causing a culture of volunteering, unpaid labour, and long-term uncertainty; some people who lead or engage in such formalized organizations must pursue additional income-generating strategies to support their livelihoods, and also the work in the self-organizations (see chapter 4). Moreover, informal self-organizations such as family and friends, which are commonly characterized as systems of safety and trust, can become burdensome. The effects of conflict and displacement, and particularly family separation or loss of relatives, can overwhelm individuals, leaving them emotionally strained and unable to rely on their usual support systems. While these informal systems are vital for survival, their limitations become more pronounced when they are unable to address the increasing emotional and material needs of displaced individuals (see chapter 5).

While research debates have thus far primarily focused on productive and supportive elements of such formalized refugee-led organizations (e.g., Griffiths et al. 2005; Gonzalez Benson 2017; Pincock et al. 2020; Lau 2021), our analyses highlighted the importance of considering the broad spectrum of refugees' informal and formalized self-organizations in their everyday lives, including the challenges these might produce or be intertwined with. The deep social embeddedness of individuals and their self-organization illuminates how they practise agency by engaging and disengaging in "different contextual environments that constitute their own structured yet flexible social universes" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 973). Individuals' disengagement in self-organizations is not always voluntary but can result from their inability to participate – for example, when they cannot afford the required membership fees. Future research should carefully consider and address such difficult sides of self-organization in exile, focusing on the limitations individuals encounter as well as produce. As such, additional studies are needed to explore the complex dynamics of refugees' self-organization, and particularly the barriers that affect individuals' actions and participation. While displacement is one important factor, individuals' experiences are diverse and intersectionally situated. Besides gender, age, and class inform social mobility and

intersects with refugeeness, and further research should explore how the multi-faceted factors of people's positioning inform their opportunities, limitations, and pathways in self-organization.

Finally, our focus on everyday embeddedness has helped to de-exceptionalize people with lived experience of displacement and their forms of self-organization as a social – and human – everyday practice, while still acknowledging the difficult conditions they often find themselves in. However, all too often, their roles have gone unacknowledged in the past. Whereas research, political, and humanitarian attention to refugees' self-organizations has increased in recent years, we must inquire if things are changing for the better and if refugees' and their organizations are finally recognized as relevant actors in the field. Hence, future research should explore not only the evolving recognition of refugees' self-organizations and the political logics behind their acknowledgment, but also the practical implications for improving their capacity to shape their own lives and influence policy. Studies should assess whether the increased focus on self-organization translates into tangible changes in refugees' autonomy and support systems in everyday life.

VITAL EFFORTS OF REFUGEES' SELF-ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC – AMID AN UNCHANGED SYSTEM

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on people worldwide. Even as we finalized the book in August 2024, by which point the pandemic had been declared over, COVID-19 continues to affect people around the world, whether through long COVID, new or repeat infections, the social consequences of having lost loved ones, or exacerbated economic hardships.

When the pandemic started, governments moved to implement a range of measures to prevent SARS-CoV-2 from spreading. In 2020 and 2021, the most common ones included closing borders, imposing lockdowns, and scaling back public life to reduce contact between people as far as possible. For those trying to flee conflict, violence, and persecution and having to cross national borders, as well as those who did not have an economic buffer to fall back on, these measures made life significantly more difficult. This also applied to people sharing a home with many others, and those who did not have one equipped with all the facilities, such as running water, sanitation, and

electricity (e.g., to store food), needed to stay inside and maintain social distancing for any length of time. The lockdown was a privilege for those who could afford to uphold it.

This was also evident in Kampala and Kyaka II. While all people were affected by the pandemic and the political countermeasures enacted in light of it, refugees often found themselves in particularly precarious circumstances. Social distancing was highly difficult and barely possible in densely populated camp and urban contexts; humanitarian services were reduced to the minimum and partly moved online, which not all people could access; medical care was challenging to obtain and often insufficient; getting to school was complicated and online teaching rarely possible due to the lack of necessary infrastructure; information about the pandemic and recommended self-protection measures were initially scarce and primarily available only in certain languages, increasing the spread of misinformation and rumours; the informal economy (e.g., hawking or short-term labour) almost completely dried up during periods of lockdown; basic needs including food were often difficult to meet; and tensions and the extent of gender-based violence at home increased (e.g., Gato 2020; Bukuluki et al. 2020; Segadlo et al. 2021a; Moyo et al. 2021; Altare et al. 2022; Sseviiri et al. 2022). Hence, the pandemic deepened existing issues and brought about new ones.

Self-organizing became the primary mechanism many refugees in Uganda and elsewhere drew on to provide and access support in this situation. That refugee-led organizations became first responders and key providers during the pandemic in countries all over the world has been highlighted in research (e.g., Alio et al. 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Refiloe Ogude and Chekero 2020; Boru 2020; McSweeney et al. 2020; Betts et al. 2021; Segadlo et al. 2021b; Chandiga Justine 2021; Nungsari and Chuah 2022; Gonzalez Benson et al. 2022; Kirsch et al. 2023). In Uganda, refugee-led organizations arranged and distributed food, water, and other everyday necessities such as soap; translated pertinent information concerning hygiene, sanitation, and social distancing; transported sick people to health centres and hospitals; produced and widely distributed masks; when possible, provided financial assistance (e.g., to cover rent or medical costs); and continued to offer psychosocial counselling, vocational training, and the support of community networks.[4]

4 These insights are based on the qualitative survey carried out in a subsequent project (see chapter 1).

Such vital assistance was not only provided by formalized self-organizations; informal entities such as family networks and friendship circles also played an especially pivotal role here. Whether by offering emotional support when loved ones passed away, offering spaces of belonging and protection, speaking about challenges and worries, providing peer counselling, or giving/lending money for people to meet their basic needs, the support that people self-organized in and through these informal collectives was as important as that of their formalized counterparts. It may even have been of greater relevance, given their inherent interweaving with people's everyday lives.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic represented an extraordinary and far-reaching emergency in which the actions of self-organizations were particularly needed, these actions and strategies are by no means entirely new. Indeed, such routines of action had existed long before the pandemic's onset and been equally vital to people's daily lives. This is evident in the fact that some of the formalized organizations had existed and provided support for more than a decade, some for more than two decades (see chapter 4). This is also evident in the information interlocutors shared with us about their experiences on arrival in Uganda; as they had few resources at hand in addition to having to adjust to their new living situations in Kampala and Kyaka II, refugees' self-organized assistance became fundamental sources of support (see chapter 5). This tradition of support is furthermore evident in how these people mobilize and self-organize economic opportunities in times of need, whether through savings groups, vocational training, trade networks, or other types of collectives (see chapter 6).

We carried out, as noted, most of the research before the pandemic started. The only difference here seems to be that such self-organized assistance was (made) visible during the pandemic, with the international community, states, and aid organizations to some extent acknowledging and drawing on refugees' self-organizations. That the courses of action individuals self-organized and provided collectively during the pandemic are not new, but rather finally came to light during this period, is also reflected by the words of one representative of a formalized self-organization. We share his key insights once again (see chapter 4):

> The humanitarian actors who are supposed to intervene in emergency situation[s], they were really distancing themselves from us

> for the fear of contracting the virus. But you've been calling yourself a humanitarian? We said: "No, for me, I'll be there to support these people." You see, COVID has built a barrier between the humanitarian actors with the person of concern. For us, we took a risk. We took a lot of risk. We went on and we said: "These are our people. They speak the same language as us. We understand each other. We have to support them." You get it? I know the support [provided by] our intervention as refugee-led organizations started before COVID. Before all these sort[s] of atrocities. We started supporting our people. But when COVID came, [it] brought a mirror. That mirror shows that people within the community, at the community level, at the grassroots level, are the actual potential. These are [the] actors that are on the front line of the response. We need to recognize them. Can I say that the agencies are recognizing us? I don't think so.[5]

If formalized self-organizations had not already provided such support for many years prior to the pandemic, they would not have had such professional structures as well as complex networks to build on during this crisis. Moreover, the representative criticizes how, despite the important work they do, recognition by aid organizations is still lacking, particularly in the areas of partnerships and funding. While collaboration and financing did increase somewhat during and due to the pandemic, structural limitations in partnerships established on an equal footing as well as sustainable – or at least recurring and medium-term – funding opportunities continue to be deficient.

REFUGEES' SELF-ORGANIZATIONS CLOSING GAPS – AS A NEOLIBERAL NARRATIVE

Although it became clear during the pandemic, if not sooner, that refugees' self-organizations are instrumental, and despite political and humanitarian agencies in Uganda and globally slowly giving increased attention (e.g., UNHCR 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Robert Bosch Stiftung 2021; Pincock et al. 2020; Milner et al. 2022), little structural change vis-à-vis the means and extent of co-operation with them seems to have occurred thus far. They continue to face the same problems as before the pandemic: insufficient recognition by humanitarian and

5 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 23 January 2021, Kampala.

government agencies and funding opportunities that, if even available, are small-scale and difficult to access. Hence, the structural difficulties facing self-organizations prevail. This suggests that key lessons have not been learned to date.

And yet, before, during, and after the pandemic a number of studies have stressed that refugee-led organizations close the gaps that the aid apparatus and/or national welfare system leave unattended (e.g., Griffiths et al. 2005; Lacroix et al. 2015; Sharif 2018; Brown 2018; Mayblin and James 2019; Alio et al. 2020; Pincock et al. 2020). With aid workers and government staff being ordered to stay at home during the pandemic, one may argue that there was little they could have done and that such gaps were thus inevitable. The representative quoted above noting that humanitarians departed and it was refugees themselves who took on the presenting risks is significant, however. The potential consequences hereof in light of the structural problems of insufficient funding and co-operation are concerning.

Pincock and colleagues argue that the core problem of funding that refugees' self-organizations face is a "chicken-and-egg dilemma. In order to receive recognition and funding, they need to have capacity. But in order to have capacity, they need recognition and funding" (2020, 110). The preceding chapters have instead shown how self-organizations already have exactly these capacities – otherwise they could not perform the vital work that they do. However, this happens under an enormous drain of resources for individuals, fighting against barriers caused specifically by national and humanitarian regulations. Here, the argument that refugee-led organizations fill gaps in the humanitarian system may become extremely problematic given the current priorities of government authorities and aid organizations in Uganda and other states – namely, self-reliance and resilience achieved through a transferring of responsibilities to refugees (see also Ilcan and Rygiel 2015; Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018; Krause and Schmidt 2020). If government authorities and aid organizations adopt – or hijack – this argument of filling gaps, then the potential arises for the chronic lack of funding to be widely interpreted as nothing undesirable given that refugee-led organizations continue to offer key services regardless and even without co-operation on an equal footing with powerful agencies. These self-organizations, according to such warped logic, would provide support and fill gaps either way – as if they do not have any other choice.

That this would be an entirely false interpretation is evident in our analysis of the detrimental effects of the precarious funding situation in chapter 4. An environment of insecurity, instability, and uncertainty takes hold in these self-organizations as a result of this uncertain and insufficient funding; competition between them arises; a tradition of volunteerism ensues that, while crucial, sees people's hard work and time go unrewarded; and valuable self-organized activities are repeatedly forced to close down due to those concerned lacking the necessary funds to continue them. Hence, emphasizing their capacities in our book does not mean in any way that they do not need funding or that the structural conditions are not extremely limiting. On the contrary, we have emphasized how people have developed capacities and expertise *despite* these restrictive and highly precarious conditions – but at enormous personal and shared cost.

One may argue that insufficient funding is not limited to refugees' self-organizations but instead constitutes a systemic problem in the global refugee protection regime. For example, following UNHCR's statute, the UN Secretariat only covers the administrative costs of UNHCR, while all expenditures on refugee protection and assistance have to be covered by donors' voluntary contributions, especially those of states. This results in chronic underfunding, and UNHCR's dependency on donors and their interests (Betts et al. 2012, 15, 96–100). In the case of refugees' self-organizations, the lack of support hints ultimately at a neoliberal logic of transferring tasks to individuals while leaving structural impediments to advancement untouched. Hence, the problem we see is that the argument of filling gaps in the humanitarian system might inadvertently contribute to a neoliberal framework whereby government authorities and aid organizations transfer responsibilities to refugees and their self-organizations in handling the difficult structures without changing the structures that complicate their lives in the first place.

We can see signs that this is the road now taken on the global level: Such a transfer of responsibilities is evident, for example, in the newly established Refugee-Led Innovation Fund (UNHCR 2021a). This fund is said to have been designed by "refugees and UNHCR colleagues" and "proposes a fundamental shift in programme architecture. It takes a grassroots approach by which refugees get the direct support and resources they need. This reflects UNHCR's commitment to strengthen participation and inclusion and honours our policy on

Age, Gender and Diversity, including our commitment to advancing Accountability to Affected People" (UNHCR 2021a, 5, 3).

This wording is expressive in and of itself. Despite noting an apparent fundamental shift – hence indirectly admitting that aid has hitherto been delivered through top-down procedures – the opposite happens. A strict separation of *us* (UNHCR, "colleagues," normal decision makers) and *them* (refugees, normally aid beneficiaries but now allowed to participate) is maintained. Moreover, UNHCR's own policies are honoured, while still framing refugees as but needy aid recipients – with the fund now supposedly stepping in and apparently helping those in need of help. The concept further notes that support "should go directly to communities so they can design their own novel interventions focused on systemic change" (UNHCR 2021a, 3). This hints at a neoliberal paradigm of self-reliance and resilience, as evidenced throughout the offered summary: "Refugees take centre stage in the delivery of our humanitarian and development work through innovation. They are the best placed to identify needs and offer solutions." The Fund also seeks to "[s]upport the forcibly displaced to … discover potential in their context, and design interventions that can generate value" (UNHCR 2021a, 1, 3).

We are not sure why those who wrote this believe that refugees need to "discover" potential – as evident throughout this book, they know their potentials and needs very well, but government authorities and aid organizations impose structural constraints on their ability to meet them. Following this skewed logic, refugees and their self-organizations are made responsible not only for coping with the extensive restrictions in place but also for *discovering* potential, designing projects, generating output, finding solutions, and changing the very humanitarian and political framework that creates the problems they face. The fund does, at least, promise to offer some much-needed resources here.

Although the summary is brief, and what we expect to be only the beginning in a line of further policies on refugee-led work to come, the outlined tendencies reflect an underlying neoliberal paradigm according to which top-down decision making and patriarchal structures continue to prevail. Refugees and their self-organizations are, as such, not considered equal partners but are merely assumed to exist under the governance of the big providers – namely, government authorities and aid organizations. As such, they are supposed to contribute to or even fulfill the responsibilities of those in power. If this

continues, then refugee-led organizations could become just another innovative marketing or funding strategy born out of aid organizations' and states' insufficient responses to displacement and refugees' needs due to conflicting political interests as well as the chronic underfunding we outlined earlier. This would mean refugee-led organizations ultimately running the risk of being further instrumentalized, perhaps even scapegoated when issues arise, and essentially remaining in precarious positions.

In Uganda's aid policies and practices, such obvious neoliberal language about refugee-led organizations is not apparent – they have been widely ignored thus far. However, the country's self-reliance approach certainly resonates with the neoliberal paradigm (see Ilcan and Rygiel 2015; Ilcan et al. 2015; Krause and Schmidt 2020); the misuse and exploitation of refugee groups in the regime points to this fact too (see chapter 3). We can only hope that, going forward, refugees' self-organizations finally receive acceptance and acknowledgment as actors and partners both in Uganda and globally – without being bandwagoned merely for humanitarian or political objectives.

Refugees' Self-Organizations Becoming a Feel-Good Label – with Risks of Tokenism

While the neoliberal framework potentially ensnaring the important work of refugees' self-organizations constitutes one side of the coin, the other is the risk of tokenism – thus conveying the appearance of collaboration and taking their perspectives seriously while in fact only being symbolic. This also applies to how refugees' self-organizations interact with each other. While Uganda's policy focus on self-reliance may give the impression of refugees' greater inclusion and treatment as actors, this remains purely symbolic.

One example of the tokenistic approach to collectives is the way government agencies co-opt refugee groups in Kyaka II. As discussed in chapter 3, they encourage people to form and engage in groups to be multipliers, helping to enforce self-reliance in the ways policies outline and thus contribute to humanitarian objectives. The inclusion of groups in aid procedures thus remains merely strategic, instead of genuinely transforming decision-making processes and inducing a power shift – an issue scholars have long discussed (e.g., Cooke and Kothari 2001; Kaiser 2005; Olivius 2014b; Milner et al. 2022; Diab et al. 2024). This also applies to the roles ascribed to the Refugee

Welfare Councils (RWCs); although they reproduce the structures of Uganda's Local Councils and members are elected by refugees, the RWCs' political role and influence are highly limited to the extent that they are only tools of the prevailing regime and its humanitarian system. Meyer argued almost two decades ago that consultation is required that considers "refugees' views in a serious manner – that is, conducted without an already-decided outcome in mind" (2006, 43). Even now, we do not see sincere developments toward that end; instead, refugee groups and the RWCs exemplify the way in which self-organizations continue to be treated in a tokenistic manner in Uganda.

These issues go beyond Uganda's aid apparatus, though, and are ingrained in the global refugee protection regime writ large. Although a participation paradigm has been outlined in recent global policies such as the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR 2018a), this is nothing new (e.g., UNHCR 1992, 2008). Moreover, refugees remain addressed as mere passive aid beneficiaries in the hierarchical, patriarchal, and paternalistic global system of refugee protection and assistance. This is most evident in one of UNHCR's key policy documents: its *Partnership Handbook*. It outlines that states carry primary responsibilities for admitting, protecting, and assisting refugees on their territory, while UNHCR is mandated by the UN to support protection and finding durable solutions for refugees. Besides co-operation between states and of states with UNHCR, other international organizations and NGOs are presented as UNHCR's operational or implementing partners (UNHCR 2019b; see also the prior version in UNHCR 2003b). The framework for implementing with partners illustrates refugees' ascribed role of aid beneficiaries, who the decision-making agencies accordingly provide for (UNHCR 2019b, 80, see figure 17). This seems to stand in contrast to the policy aims to promote refugees' self-reliance and resilience (see also UNHCR ExCom 2017), "actively and meaningfully engage" them (UNHCR 2018a, 7), and support refugee-led organizations (UNHCR 2021a).

Yet, the limited degree to which this is realized is visible not only in the continued top-down decision making but also in the framing of including or involving refugees and their self-organizations in traditional agencies' actions. For this, UNHCR has regularly stressed how refugees offer benefits with their resourceful skills and contribute to host countries for years – for example, as "agents of peace and development" (UNHCR 2003b, 58); as "active and creative agents" (UNDP and UNHCR 2014, 17); or as "self-reliant agents of change,

[who are] able to contribute to the peace, stability and prosperity of the communities that offer them asylum" (UNHCR 2014a, 8).

Hence, refugees and their self-organizations are inextricably and inevitably linked to the critical notion of participation in the regime and its humanitarian system. This involvement occurs in a framework predefined in global policies and operationalized by aid workers on-site; they select refugees or self-organizations according to criteria of usefulness and desirability vis-à-vis core objectives, define the nature of their participation, and determine the acceptable scope of actorhood and partnership – as ultimately representing but symbolic gestures. Policy-makers and aid workers hereby exercise power over refugees in the Foucauldian sense of governmentality. Diab, Jasiukaitis, and El-Zakka (2024) also criticize the tokenistic involvement of refugee-led organizations in Lebanon's humanitarian sphere, undermining their initiatives and services. However, refugees in, through, and for their self-organizations also practise power by deciding whether to fulfill these roles or challenge them; the precarious conditions they face limit – or at least influence – such power of choice, though. This was also evident in Uganda. For instance, in a meeting with a group in Kyaka II in its foundation phase, members discussed how they present themselves to the aid organizations in order to receive initial funding and recognition, enabling them to enjoy access to further support activities. They knew who to approach, which words to drop into the proposal, and similar. However, they had firm boundaries: "It has to be clear that it is our idea. We cannot be absorbed by them … Because it happens often that people bring ideas and it is overtaken by the people of power."[6]

Tokenistic interaction also appeared *among* refugees' self-organizations in Uganda. Representatives remarked on symbolic partnerships that were helpful for other organizations but not themselves and their own members. Such criticism was also voiced concerning the establishment of the Refugee Led Organisation Network Uganda (RELON Uganda, see chapter 4). Some interlocutors lamented the ways in which some leaders and representatives sought attention for their refugee-led organizations and pursued collaboration with others only selectively. One person strongly criticized the fact that a small group of people had founded RELON and only afterwards "requested us to join, but even then they were not willing

6 Discussion with five men from DR Congo, 7 July 2017, Kyaka II.

to share the details of what was entailed."[7] The man concluded that they could not be part of this undertaking.

Beyond RELON, merely symbolic partnerships were also rued: "Many of the local organizations in Uganda mentioned our name as a partner. But in the end, nothing comes in action. It is only marketing. We also want to have our direct partners to promote our organization because we go through many challenges."[8] Particular criticism here concerned funding opportunities, a marketplace that some larger formalized self-organizations have come to dominate. Their influence arises from repeatedly acquiring backing for themselves and partly also by strategically including certain partnerships with other such organizations that turn out, however, to be entirely symbolic as funds are not or only rarely shared. Such experiences were recounted especially by those leaders and representatives of self-organizations that focus their key attention on particular social groups and minorities.

Such inclusion resonates with the humanitarian participation paradigm in which decisions are taken in a top-down manner in line with the dominant actors' core interests. In regard to gender mainstreaming, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010) discusses how ultimately prioritizing one group over another has serious consequences for those not fitting into the ideals being pursued. Returning to refugees' self-organizations, a lack of genuine inclusion leaves insufficient room for their representatives to voice their perspectives and most of all to be heard and thus to influence decision making. That some refugee-led organizations are, at times, merely embraced as strategic tools even in partnerships further contributes to the leadership struggles and gendered hierarchies we discussed earlier.

GLOBAL SELF-ORGANIZATIONS INITIATING CHANGE IN THE SYSTEM – AS A WAY FORWARD

The prevailing legal, political, economic, social, and other problems complicate people's lives in exile but do not stop them from taking action – on the local as well as the global level. People with lived experience of displacement challenge such treatment and claim political representation and participation via their self-organization. That this applies not only to specific refugee-led organizations but also to their networks is evident in the self-description of RELON Uganda,

7 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 8 December 2016, Kampala.
8 Man from DR Congo, dialogue, 11 February 2021, Kampala.

which we analyzed in chapter 4. RELON Uganda pursues the strategic objective of influencing policy decisions that affect refugees, as well as fundraising and mobilizing resources to support refugee-related initiatives in Uganda.[9] Hence, they work to overcome the enduring system of top-down decision making vis-à-vis refugee protection indicative of policy-making *about* but not *with* refugees, thereby requesting a seat at the table.

Other networks pursue similar objects on various political levels. Focusing on global politics, refugees have initiated and been leading several networks in recent years. In 2017, for example, the Network for Refugee Voices (NRV) was founded, which participated in the negotiations of the Global Compact for Refugees alongside other organizations. The NRV was instrumental in advocating for meaningful refugee participation both in the negotiation process and the text of the compact.[10] In the following year, the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) emerged in the aftermath of the Global Summit of Refugees organized by refugees in Geneva. The GNR serves as a platform for refugee-led initiatives, networks, and advocacy groups worldwide to increase refugee participation in shaping policy.[11] In 2019, New Women Connectors (NWC) was founded by Anila Noor as a migrant- and refugee-led social movement that champions feminist principles. The NWC focuses on empowering refugees and migrants by actively involving them in co-creating solutions to ensure their meaningful participation[12] (for further insights into such developments, see Bahram 2020; Milner et al. 2022).

Moreover, the objective of enhancing refugees' political participation is mirrored in the name of R-SEAT: Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table. A globally functioning refugee-led organization founded in 2021, R-SEAT is led by Mustafa Alio and Rez Gardi and based in Canada. It embodies "an international initiative working to enhance the effectiveness of global refugee responses, by co-designing mechanisms to amplify refugee leadership ecosystems and increase

9 See Refugee-Led Organization Network of Uganda, "About Us," https://relonuganda.org/about-3/ (last accessed 14 August 2023).

10 See Network for Refugee Voices, home page, https://www.networkforrefugeevoices.org/ (last accessed 14 August 2023).

11 See Global Refugee-Led Network, home page, http://globalrefugeeled-network.org/index.html (link defunct; last accessed 14 August 2023).

12 See New Women Connectors for Inclusion and Social Justice, home page, https://www.newwomenconnectors.com/ (last accessed 14 August 2023).

the participation of refugees at state levels in a meaningful, sustainable, and transformative way."[13] To this end, R-SEAT represents the interests of refugees in international political forums and supports the networking of refugee-led organizations worldwide.

The outlined Uganda-based self-organizations thus correspond with various counterparts worldwide, as ultimately striving to overcome political restrictions and top-down policy-making by proving that refugees are actors who should be involved in political debates about them locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. The attention and pressure that is being generated by their endeavours is causing a shift worldwide, as political and humanitarian actors increasingly come to acknowledge these developments. Hence, their commitment translated into political actions. Following the 2016 New York Declaration, the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees stresses the need for refugees' meaningful participation in related decision-making processes in paragraph 34: "Responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist" (UNHCR 2018a, para. 34).

The Global Compact on Refugees also established the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) as a key event to support the implementation of the compact, held every four years. The GRF provides critical insights into global changes toward refugees' participation. For example, through regional consultations across various continents, the GRN developed comprehensive guidelines on refugee participation and promoted the Refugee Participation Pledge at the GRF in 2019, which was supported by Australia, Canada, Denmark, and the Netherlands (Milner et al. 2022, 583). The pledge was continued at the following GRF in 2023 – gaining growing attention and wide-ranging contributions.[14] Academia supported the process too: the multi-stakeholder pledge Shifting Power – Advancing Localization of Research and Elevating the Voices of Host and Forcibly Displaced Communities Globally was issued,[15] focusing on the expertise of people with lived

13 See Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table, home page, https://refugeesseat.org/ (last accessed 14 August 2023).

14 See Global Compact on Refugees, "Multi-stakeholder Pledge: Refugee Participation," https://globalcompactrefugees.org/multi-stakeholder-pledge-refugee-participation (last accessed 15 October 2024).

15 The pledge was issued under the leadership of the Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network (GAIN), the Sergio Vieira de Mello Chairs (De Mello Chairs), the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network

experience of displacement, amplifying locally produced knowledges, and fostering partnerships to ensure that research led by those displaced directly informs global policies and interventions.[16]

Structural change is also visible. While refugee advisers were part of three delegations – namely, those of Canada, Germany, and the United States – in 2019 (Alio and Gardi 2021), "13 governments included refugee advisors in their delegations: Armenia, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States" in 2023 (R-SEAT 2024). The number of participants with lived experience of displacement increased too. At the 2019 GRF, of the 3,000 delegates, only 70 had lived experience of displacement,[17] while over 300 were invited in 2023.[18] Despite this increase, refugees still made up only about 7 per cent of the approximately 4,200 participants. However, problems persist. A significant one arose in 2023 as some of the invited refugees were unable to obtain visas to enter Switzerland and therefore could not attend the GRF. This was the case for members of the Africa Refugee-Led Network (ARN), with 23 out of 25 *invited* individuals being denied visas, drawing strong criticism.[19] Other refugees were

(LERRN), the International Development Research Centre – Canada (IDRC), and the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), involving a number of additional members.

16 See Global Compact on Refugees, "Multi-stakeholder Pledge: Shifting Power – Advancing Localization of Research and Elevating the Voices of Host and Forcibly Displaced Communities Globally," https://globalcompactrefugees.org/multi-stakeholder-pledge-shifting-power-advancing-localization-research-and-elevating-voices-host (last accessed 15 October 2024).

17 See UNHCR, "Global Refugee Forum 2019," https://www.unhcr.org/events/global-refugee-forum-2019 (last accessed 15 October 2024).

18 See UNHCR, "Global Refugee Summit Opens with Focus on Unity for World's Refugees," press release, 13 December 2023, https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/global-refugee-summit-opens-focus-unity-world-s-refugees (last accessed 15 October 2024).

19 See Africa Refugee-led Network (@ARN_africa), "Disappointing visa denials for @ARN_africa delegates …," 10 December 2023, https://x.com/ARN_africa/status/1733824836789580145; "Calling all advocates for #MRP …," 12 December 2023, https://x.com/ARN_africa/status/1734509170886414461 (last accessed 15 October 2024).

also denied entry, including one person whose image was prominently displayed on the UNHCR website for the GRF.[20]

In addition to the official discussions at the 2023 GRF, a great variety of linked events were organized addressing diverse issues including refugees' meaningful participation. The so-called Refugee Leadership Multipurpose Space (R-Space) is particularly noteworthy. Over forty events took place at the R-Space, primarily focusing on experiences and pathways for increased representation and participation of refugees. Most of the events were organized by representatives of refugee-led organizations. They were also instrumental in creating the R-Space: key actors included R-SEAT, the GRN, and the NWC, who partnered with foundations like the Robert Bosch Foundation and Open Society, as well as academic institutions like the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN).[21]

Beyond the GRFS, UNHCR has established an Advisory Board composed of sixteen refugee-led organizations in 2020, including those led by women, LGBTQ+ persons, and persons with disabilities.[22] In the same years, UNHCR held the so-called UNHCR NGO Innovation Award targeting "Refugee-led Organizations in the COVID-19 Response" – specifically to recognize, support, and work with these collectives (UNHCR 2020, 2021b). In 2021, UNHCR also developed the Refugee-Led Innovation Fund (UNHCR 2021a), which we critically explored above. Moreover, as we were finalizing this book, Refugee Advisory Panels were set up to support national politics and decision making about refugees in Canada, Colombia, Germany, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, the United States, and New Zealand, and were under preparation in other countries too – a process that is centrally catalyzed by R-SEAT.[23]

20 See Edmund Page (@EdmundPage), "UNHCR used the picture …," 13 December 2023, https://x.com/EdmundPage/status/1734877471726571863 (last accessed 15 October 2024).

21 See Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table, "Global Refugee Forum 2023," https://www.refugeesseat.org/r-space; Global Compact on Refugees, "Refugee Leadership Multipurpose Space – R-Space," https://globalcompactrefugees.org/news-stories/events/refugee-leadership-multipurpose-space-r-space (last accessed 15 October 2024).

22 See UNHCR, "Advisory Board to the UNHCR Task Team on Engagement with Organizations Led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons," May 2025, https://globalcompactrefugees.org/media/advisory-board-members (last accessed 26 August 2025).

23 See Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table, "Engage," https://www.refugeesseat.org/engage (link defunct; last accessed 15 October 2024).

In light of such developments, Milner, Alio, and Gardi (2022) argue that refugees' participation in policy and protection is an emerging norm in the global refugee protection regime. Refugees have, though, also claimed their rights and participation in global political forums, and made their voices heard in the past. Harley (2021, 2022) shows that the involvement of representatives with lived experiences of displacement has been a feature of related policy debates for decades now (see also Harley and Hobbs 2020). Irfan (2020, 2022) highlights how Palestinian refugees have petitioned international authorities, while Janmyr (2022) examines the contemporary challenges of achieving meaningful participation of Sudanese refugees through representative committees in UNHCR's work in Lebanon. Moreover, Ramazani (2023) explores how meaningful refugee participation can enhance the effectiveness of policies and programs, highlighting the three models of consultative, advisory, and professional participation to assess how theories of change can lead to practical improvements.

Despite various efforts, refugees' participation in global political discourses and their important roles in the humanitarian system – as evident in their self-organizations' work – remain insufficiently acknowledged by state officials, aid staff, the media, and the wider public. This has led Bahram (2020), Alio and Gardi (2021), as well as Diab, Jasiukaitis, and El-Zakka (2024) to criticize the hitherto tokenistic representation of refugees, which we also discussed in our book. Based on global developments, change seems to be underway, but our analysis of refugee-led organizations' work in Uganda over the course of the past few years indicates a very slow pace. It takes political will from the traditional actors of the global refugee regime as well as the national ones to accept and meet refugees and their self-organizations as equal actors and partners, as the latter remain confronted by wide-ranging structural challenges on a daily basis.

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