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Between hope and harm: the fragmentary effects of resettlement for Congolese refugees in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This paper advances the concept of *fragmented settlement* to conceptualize the impacts of international resettlement policy on refugee populations in countries of asylum and transit. Drawing on fieldwork with Congolese refugees in Kampala, Uganda, I show that hopes of attaining resettlement interact with limited spaces and entrenched uncertainty to exacerbate refugees' liminality and generate mistrust among community members. Bridging refugee and migration studies, I show that this fragmentation of *social time* and *social trust* undermines the already precarious settlement of refugees in Uganda, indicating that resettlement has impacts beyond the few who eventually depart. These harms do not go unchallenged however, as community leaders frame resettlement as corrupting and disempowering, seeking to reorient refugees toward collective projects of claims-making, community building, and incorporation. In turn, this paper extends critical approaches to resettlement as a "solution" to displacement, while centering refugee agency in understanding the outcomes of this humanitarian program.

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Refugees; resettlement; hope; waiting; trust; Uganda

Introduction

Refugee resettlement is a highly valued humanitarian provision. It involves states in the Global North inviting refugees to travel and become legal permanent residents with a pathway to citizenship. In a context of increasingly protracted displacement and restrictive controls on asylum-seeking (FitzGerald 2019), resettlement offers the only safe and legal way out of long-term, potentially multi-generational exile for millions of refugees around the globe (Fee and Arar 2019). For some, resettlement can be the difference between life and death. At the same time, fewer than one percent of refugees are resettled each year, reflecting restrictive policies in the Global North. This creates a tension and power imbalance at the core of resettlement: while a largely symbolic, discretionary program serving the liberal self-image of western countries (FitzGerald 2019, 9), resettlement remains deeply meaningful in the daily lives of many refugees around the globe. The present paper examines this tension, asking how the uncertain promise of resettlement impacts refugees in countries of asylum and transit in the Global South.

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To do this, I draw on interviews and fieldwork with Congolese refugees navigating a selective resettlement program in Kampala, Uganda. This population was prioritized for resettlement in 2012, such that by the time I arrived for research in 2019, many had seen friends, neighbors, and family members depart. This raised the visibility and promise of resettlement (Jansen 2008) and embedded refugees in transnational networks promoting migratory aspirations (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Resettlement remained elusive, however, with just over one percent of Congolese living in Uganda resettled each year between 2012 and 2018. Moreover, most were selected from a rural settlement in western Uganda rather than the city due to the tendency of resettlement pipelines to concentrate spaces around particular places and populations (Watson 2023). Few of those living in Kampala would ultimately depart – a likelihood that only decreased with the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017 (Fee and Arar 2019).

Extending existing scholarship, I found that resettlement had ambivalent outcomes for Congolese refugees in Kampala (Boeyink et al. 2025; Horst 2006; Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor 2018; McNally et al. 2025; Oka 2014). On the one hand, hopes of attaining resettlement and migrating to “the West” were almost ubiquitous across the population, orienting refugees to a more promising future. On the other hand, these hopes conflicted with the reality of limited spaces and entrenched uncertainty to compound experiences of liminality and generate new seams of mistrust among refugees. While existing scholarship tends to focus on individual-level outcomes, I show that these harms become internalized within the broader context of refugees’ lives. Specifically, resettlement *fragments* the already strained social resources and collective capacities of Congolese to navigate the challenges of exile. These impacts did not go unchallenged, however, as community leaders sought to repair social ties and reorient hopes to collective futures in Uganda.

In conceptualizing the fragmentary effects of resettlement, this paper advances critical understanding of resettlement as a humanitarian “solution” to displacement (Espiritu 2014; Tang 2015). While extant accounts frame resettlement as a migratory process mediating a journey from displacement/refugeehood to settlement/citizenship (Arar et al. 2025), I show that the uncertain promise of resettlement paradoxically unsettles refugees in exile. This is significant because most live in countries of asylum long after admissions decline and priorities shift. As such, this paper bridges refugee and migration scholarship by examining the link between humanitarian governance and refugee incorporation in Global South “host” countries (Crawley and Jones 2021; FitzGerald and Arar 2018). Extending existing research (El-Shaarawi 2015; Horst 2006), I show that resettlement generates harms that are internalized and contested within the wider context of refugees’ lives (see also McNally et al. 2025). This finding is significant in places like Uganda, where resettlement programs interact with more accommodative policies. Beyond the present case, the concept of fragmented settlement – and its related components of displaced hopes and mistrust – may be applicable to the growing number of migrants living in zones of waiting and transit across the Global South.

The ambivalent outcomes of resettlement

Waiting is central to refugeehood (Conlon 2011). Unable to safely return home and excluded from membership in host countries, refugees are often forced to wait for a “solution” to their displacement with restricted movement, employment, education, and

rights. “Trapped in a state of limbo” and “permanent temporariness” (Hyndman and Giles 2011), refugees are denied the ability to reliably plan or control their time, leading to a pervasive feeling of stuckness and stalled life. Deprived the protections of national citizenship and living in a foreign country, they also find themselves at the whim of domestic politics, international relations, and unaccountable humanitarian agencies, adding an existential quality to their waiting. These experiences reinforce refugees’ subordinate status and demonstrate their lack of power vis-à-vis the institutions governing their lives (Jensen 2023, 47–68). Researchers have long demonstrated the negative effects of waiting on refugee well-being (Grace, Bais, and Roth 2018; Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor 2018; Phillimore and Cheung 2021).

Resettlement is a humanitarian program that aims to resolve conditions of liminality by reintegrating refugees into national citizenship. And for some, resettlement accomplishes this goal, beckoning new and challenging journeys of incorporation in the receiving country. But resettlement offers a “solution” to a very small number of refugees. For the vast majority, resettlement appears as a highly valued *potential*. Researchers have revealed the ambivalent outcomes of resettlement as potential (Durodola 2025; El-Shaarawi 2015; Horst 2006; McNally et al. 2025; Oka 2014). On the one hand, resettlement aspirations orient refugees to a more promising future, providing an affective resource to manage the difficulties of displacement. For some, the prospect of resettlement can be a point of pride, indicating the relative advantages of refugee status over even national citizenship (Jansen 2008; Moulin and Nyers 2007). On the other hand, resettlement hopes can exacerbate feelings of liminality and become a source of suffering as hopes go unfulfilled.

Horst’s (2006) classic study of widespread resettlement dreams, or “buufis”, among Somali refugees in Kenya lays out this ambivalence starkly, finding that resettlement brings “hope and remittances into the camps but [removes] investments from the region and, when the dream cannot be reached, [can have] adverse psychological effects” (Horst 2006, 143). Horst recounts the tragic story of Nasir (145–146), who was “relatively satisfied with life” prior to his brother sponsoring his resettlement. He subsequently became obsessed about his future in America, thinking about it “during the day and dreaming about it at night”. He was later rejected, however, and experienced something akin to a psychotic break. Horst hears that Nasir “is now in Kismaayo where traditional healers are trying to cure his illness”.

Similar dynamics have been found elsewhere. El-Shaarawi (2015), for example, found Iraqi refugees in Cairo keeping their children from school, saving already insufficient resources, and delaying important life decisions in anticipation of resettlement despite not knowing when or if their “time would come”. These practices compounded experiences of liminality and social isolation, generating new psychosocial harms (El-Shaarawi 2015, 50–51). Drawing on work in Turkey, Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor (2018) found resettlement to be a “site of ongoing traumatisation” due to protracted waiting and uncertainty. Oka’s (2014, 34) work revealed Somali refugees in Kenya living in a “permanent transition” in which resettlement seemed always just around the corner: “They are told to bear their lot and wait for something ... that will take them back into that world out there”. But, Oka finds, “It is the waiting they dread the most”. Strikingly, Fee (2022) found similar dynamics with Iranian refugees in Austria, who despite having access to a relatively privileged legal pathway, incurred material, emotional, and physical costs as they anxiously waited for resettlement.

A consistent theme in the literature is that resettlement policy and administration play a key role in the program's ambivalent outcomes (Thomson 2012). Unlike other areas of immigration and asylum law, there is no right to resettlement, due process, or appeal (Sandvik 2011). Notwithstanding official emphases on transparency, communication, and counseling (UNHCR 2011, 141–144), refugees are often unclear on selection criteria and timeframes, and generally unable to check their files or attain reliable information about their case. Many respond by constructing shared narratives about resettlement (Ozkul and Jarrous 2021) or “game” the system by crafting vulnerability scripts and identities assumed to make them more likely to be selected (Ikanda 2018; Jansen 2008). Drawing on work with Somalis in Kenya, Jansen, for example, found widespread corruption, extortion, and cheating as refugees came to perceive resettlement as something to be achieved and local actors exploited uncertainty for financial gain. These practices encouraged further bureaucratic suspicion in a context already structured by securitized concerns around threat and fraud. Moreover, shifts in global priorities and political volatility around admissions result in sizable year-to-year changes in the volume and geography of resettlement (Fee and Arar 2019). Alongside case rejections, these shifts can lead to riots, protests, violence, and tragic instances of self-harm and suicide when the promise of resettlement begins to fade (Jansen 2008, 573; Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor 2018; Ozkul and Jarrous 2021).

In sum, hopes of attaining resettlement interact with long waits and pronounced uncertainty to exacerbate liminality, create tensions between refugees and governing institutions, and increase levels of corruption. The present paper extends this body of work by exploring how these harms become internalized within the broader context of refugees' lives. Specifically, I argue that resettlement can *fragment* already fragile processes of settlement by displacing hopes and undermining social trust. As we will see, these harms are critiqued and contested by community leaders, who seek to repair social ties and re-place refugee hopes to local political projects, community building, and incorporation.

Fragmented settlement

Despite dominant humanitarian frames that cast refugees as passive victims awaiting a “durable solution” to their displacement (Arar and FitzGerald 2022, 15–17; Arar et al. 2025), many refugees incorporate into transit contexts even as they remain socially marginalized and unable – even unwilling – to permanently settle (Crawley and Jones 2021). This reflects the protracted character of contemporary displacement, which sees many received into multigenerational co-ethnic communities and urban enclaves (Cole 2021; Lyytinen 2017). It also reflects shifts in Global North migration management priorities, which emphasize refugee “self-sufficiency” through integration in local labor markets and other national institutions (Arar 2017; Betts and Collier 2017). Moreover, a broader “politics of living” sees refugees engage in local projects, solidarities, and contentions that draw them into local contexts (Espiritu 2014, 49–80). The literature reviewed in the previous section, however, pays less attention to how resettlement interacts with these ongoing processes of settlement, reflecting an entrenched scholarly division between migration and refugee studies (FitzGerald and Arar 2018). Connecting migration scholarship on settlement and incorporation with refugee scholarship on temporariness and

humanitarian governance, I identify two primary ways in which resettlement impacts refugees' collective lives in exile.

First, the uncertain promise of resettlement displaces refugee hopes and aspirations from the local context to the resettlement country. Hope and aspiration are fundamentally social categories (Carling and Schewel 2018; Parla 2019), and their spatiotemporal displacement has social ramifications. Hope orients individuals to shared futures, providing the platform for anticipatory imagination, social cohesion, and collective action (Durodola 2025; Mattingly 2010; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). In this regard, hope is a sort of social resource, binding groups together and coordinating collective action toward common projects – such as claims-making or local integration. As we saw above, the promise of resettlement can lead refugees to put aspects of their lives on hold and divest from local contexts as they wait for “their time to come” (El-Shaarawi 2015). This fragments the shared temporal and affective horizons important for pursuing collective projects. While this temporal split is intrinsic to refugeehood and the “durable solutions” framework, the rising prospect of resettlement for prioritized populations can exacerbate the issue (Horst 2006), even as the underlying likelihood of resettlement remains slim.

Second, the extent of bureaucratic opacity and related practices of corruption, extortion, and “gaming” surrounding resettlement undermines social trust. A large body of research demonstrates the importance of social trust for migration and incorporation (Portes 1998). Often conceptualized as social capital, trust is key to building and reproducing social networks; pooling and distributing resources; and generating a sense of stability and cohesion among immigrant communities that can attenuate the challenges of migration. Trust is perhaps particularly important for refugees in the Global South given the centrality of community infrastructure for providing members a measure of stability and security (Cole 2021; Lyytinen 2017). Without trust, communities struggle to bring resources together and organize this infrastructure, while members are dissuaded from participating in collective endeavors. Displacement already strains social ties by creating resource scarcity and competition (Kibria 1995; Menjívar 2000), and many displaced people find themselves subject to exploitation within and beyond their communities (Jansen 2008; Phillips and Missbach 2017). Resettlement enters this context as a scarce but highly valued resource. When coupled with opaque administration, resettlement can create new seams of mistrust, undermining the collective capacity of refugee communities to navigate the challenges of exile.

I deploy the language of fragmentation to conceptualize these two harmful effects, i.e. displaced hopes and mistrust. While some theorize fragmentation as an essential condition of migrant-hood (Sayad and Bourdieu 2004), others emphasize that its salience and implications are socially and institutionally embedded (Bialas 2023, 126–150; Crawley and Jones 2021; Malkki 1995; Menjívar 2000). I likewise argue that the uncertain promise of resettlement interacts with migratory ambitions and the wider context of globalized containment and remote control (Balakian 2025) to fragment refugees' ongoing and precarious settlement. While providing many hopes for a brighter future, resettlement can become a source of suffering and disruption with permeating social repercussions. Exactly because of this, community leaders contest resettlement through moral and political projects aimed at re-placing hopes and repairing social ties. My paper thus contributes to critical refugee studies, demonstrating the importance of refugee agency in mediating resettlement's paradoxically *unsettling* outcomes (Espiritu 2014; Tang 2015). I

will return to these implications and a broader assessment of resettlement as a humanitarian “solution” to displacement in the discussion section.

Data & methods

For complex historical reasons (see Prunier 2008), millions of Congolese refugees remain in protracted exile across Africa’s Great Lakes region with limited prospects for safe return. Marginalized from resettlement channels for decades, they were prioritized for third-country resettlement in 2012, becoming the largest population in global resettlement programs. Since then, nearly 150,000 have been resettled, mostly to the United States. As the graph below shows, the result has been a sizable up-tick in departures. This has increased the visibility of resettlement (Jansen 2008) through forms of administrative “pre-processing” such as biometric gatherings, case interviews, and family determination checks geared toward improving administrative databases in preparation for large-scale processing (Watson 2023). Similarly, Congolese have seen growing numbers of friends and family members depart, raising the prospect that they’ll be next, and embedding refugees in transnational networks elevating the promise of life abroad (Horst 2006; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). This is significant for Congolese refugees in the Great Lakes region (largely from North and South Kivu) who had little established presence in North America or Europe prior to resettlement. Collectively, these factors make the prospect of resettlement an integral part of everyday life (Figure 1).

Among the countries of the Great Lakes, Uganda joins Tanzania as the largest source country for Congolese departures. Still, just over one percent of Congolese living in Uganda have been selected each year since 2012, indicating that an individuals’ likelihood of resettlement remains small. This likelihood is even smaller given the concentration of resettlement in several camps in western Uganda. To examine refugee experiences of resettlement, I look specifically at the situation of refugees living in Uganda’s capital city, Kampala, which hosts the largest number of refugees outside formal settlements managed by the government and international agencies.

While agricultural settlements are incorporated into Uganda’s national development plan, urban refugees have a more ambiguous position (Betts and Collier 2017, 140–168). Uganda allows refugees to “self-settle” outside rural settlements, and there is

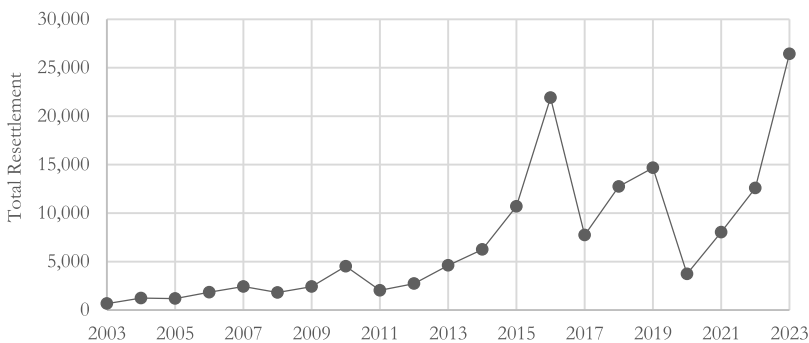


Figure 1. Congolese resettlement by year. Data source, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/resettlement/resettlement-data>.

between 50 and 150,000 Congolese living in the metro Kampala area. The majority live in the neighboring municipalities of Katwe and Nsambya, southwest of Kampala City Center. Katwe is a multigenerational ethnic enclave, known colloquially as Little Congo, with its own property market and commercial center. Congolese tend to live in tenement style housing, and many of the homes are built on reclaimed wetlands subject to flooding and the collapse of urban runoff tributaries during rainy seasons. These areas are categorized as informal settlements by municipal government and receive limited public services. They are also subject to periods of intense policing, forced evictions, and land seizures due to Kampala's "modernization" reforms and the contested character of reclaimed wetlands.

Despite refugees in Kampala being considered "self-settled", several (I)NGOs offer cash supports, health care, livelihood programming, childcare, and business support, supplemented by a sizable if informal refugee-community infrastructure (Lyytinen 2017). Refugees in Kampala also have access to labor markets and are eligible for public schooling and services on par with Ugandan nationals. This stems from the country's relatively open refugee policies, often characterized as among the most "welcoming" in the world (Betts and Collier 2017, 161). In reality, however, the poor state of existing services interacts with ethnic protectionism and implementation gaps to leave many struggling to get by (Lyytinen 2017). Congolese also experience discrimination in regulated urban markets, leading some into unlicensed street "hawking" subject to aggressive policing by city government. Beyond hawking, refugees drew income from day labor work in construction and security; (in)formal work in the ethnic economy; small business ownership in the service sector; cash supports from charitable organizations; and (I)NGO livelihood programs. As in other urban contexts then, Congolese refugees are largely dependent on the ability of individuals and families to harness social ties and associated resources to survive (Palmgren 2017, 2262).

This paper examines how the growing promise of resettlement impacts refugee lives in exile. To do this, I draw on data collected during four months of fieldwork in Kampala between January and May 2018 (Watson 2021). I collected three forms of data, including eleven expert interviews with Uganda-based resettlement practitioners; "go-alongs" (Kusenbach 2003) with refugees as they attended appointments and office hours at Inter-Aid, the UNHCR's main implementing partner in Kampala; and fieldwork in Katwe and Nsambya. To enrich observations, I conducted forty semi-structured interviews with Congolese, gathering information on demographics and livelihoods; outlooks and orientations to the future; and political subjectivity, assessed through views on incorporation, belonging, and legal status. No financial compensation was offered for participation. Subject to consent, most interviews were recorded and later transcribed. For non-recorded interviews, I used a standardized, printed form organized by the key interview themes. Sixty-five percent of respondents were women, reflecting the demographic composition of the Congolese population. All interviewees had received refugee status (based on self-report) and had lived in Uganda for over a year. The majority had been in the country for at least five years meaning they had experienced the effects of group prioritization for global resettlement.

To assist with fieldwork, I worked with a Congolese research assistant who introduced me to their personal networks and accompanied me during initial interviews. As we walked between visits, we often met others for interviews, such as shopkeepers and

business owners, a group of men fixing a collapsed riverbank, and neighbors of people who we planned to interview. I also connected with people through attendance at a refugee-led organization based in Nsambya. In this regard, I cannot say that my sample is representative. Questions of representation are challenging in Kampala given the lack of reliable demographic data on the urban refugee population. While most spoke conversational English, thirty-two interviews were at least partially interpreted by my RA from Lingala or Swahili to aid expression, comfort, and clarity.

Before moving on, it is important to address two issues that shaped data collection. First, the Congolese population of Kampala had recently seen several research teams come through due to international interest in Uganda's refugee policies (Betts 2021). Many expressed frustration that they saw little tangible change in their lives despite this research attention, generating a view of research as extractive (Block et al. 2013). Moreover, many expressed bewilderment and offense that researchers so rarely interacted with them beyond collecting survey data. In response, I sought to incorporate reflexivity into my research and form deeper relationships beyond interviews. Attending church services, spending time in refugees' homes, and eating with families provided opportunities for more reciprocal relationship building. Relatedly, I was often viewed as a source of resources and even misrecognized as an NGO worker (Block et al. 2013). To prevent such interpretations, I was intentional in emphasizing my position as a researcher, and more participatory forms of research helped structure interactions beyond predominant humanitarian framings of provider/beneficiary. Although such acts and research strategies do not ameliorate the extractive character of data collection in contexts of class, race, and citizenship inequality, they establish a greater level of reciprocity in the research relationship. More concretely, and beyond the context of research, I participated in programming and provided administrative support for a local refugee-led NGO, which I continued to support after fieldwork.

The ambivalent outcomes of resettlement

This section examines the effects of increased resettlement on Congolese refugees living in Kampala. While many associated resettlement with a more promising future, the small number of places and pervasive uncertainty interacted to compound feelings of liminality and generate mistrust among community members. While distressing for individuals, I demonstrate the wider social ramifications of these harms, which work to further undermine the social resources and collective capacity of refugees to navigate the challenges of displacement. A second section elaborates this argument by drawing attention to a set of moral and political projects contesting the fragmentary effects of resettlement.

Liminality: hoping & waiting for resettlement

Fabrice arrived in Uganda with his family in the mid-2000s from the North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Like many Congolese, Fabrice had seen friends and family members recently depart for resettlement and he imagined what life would be like abroad. He would frequently ask me questions such as "Which country is best to go to?" "I've heard it's easy to get a good job in Texas. Is that true?" Or "I hear everybody needs a car. How do people learn to drive?" Life post-resettlement was also

a common topic of both serious and lighthearted conversation among his friends during social gatherings. While recognizing the small numbers departing, Fabrice firmly believed his time would soon come: "Our file's been with the UNHCR for some time. We're thinking that any day now, with the grace of God, we'll be called for the interview. Until then, we're just waiting here". Over the following months, I came to see how the hope of resettlement permeated Fabrice's life. For example, Fabrice had been engaged for several years but his fiancé's family would not approve the marriage. The issue boiled down to the family's resettlement file. They had been called for an interview the year prior, and although uncertain about their prospects, they were concerned that the marriage could jeopardize their case or delay proceedings. "Everybody is saying to wait", Fabrice said, "because if you marry before, you'll have to change your file. So, we wait". Although Fabrice saw this as "very challenging", he believed it ultimately worthwhile because his future children would have a better life after resettlement.

Fabrice's story represents the ways in which hopes for resettlement weave their way into refugees' lives. Interlocutors, for example, would often show me pictures of friends and family outside glass-fronted malls or famous European monuments and discuss with me their plans after resettlement. Like Fabrice, many had put important aspects of their lives on hold as they waited for their "turn to come". For example, I interviewed a married couple outside their home in Nsambya. The husband was a tailor and worked from home, and their three children were playing outside. Discussing concerns about their children's future in Uganda, Gloria quipped that "There's no good schools to go to. In fact, there's no bad schools to go to either!" They'd decided to keep their kids home and wait to send them to school: "Once we get resettled, then my kids will have a good education". I asked where their case was in the process, and Gloria's husband, Moise, told me they didn't know. "We had an interview in 2016", he said, "but we've not heard from [the UNHCR] since". "What are your plans until you do hear something?" I asked. After a pause, Moise shrugged and said simply that they'd wait until they did.

Across thirty-eight of my forty interviews, refugees reported that their main aspiration for the future was attaining resettlement, and narratives like Fabrice's, Gloria's, and Moise's were remarkably common. Most struggled to envision a life otherwise and reported, as one young woman put it, "just hoping, waiting, and hoping". This shaped how refugees viewed their future in Uganda. As noted, Uganda's relatively open refugee laws provide conditional pathways for incorporation and even constitutional provisions for naturalization for those who have lived in Uganda for twenty years. Those I interviewed, however, roundly opposed integration as "becoming Ugandan" and saw naturalization as undesirable given its disqualification for resettlement.

Bukasa, a father in his thirties, put it succinctly.

I did not come here to be a Ugandan. I am here as a refugee and my hope now is to get resettled. This is my future. If I get [citizenship] or become Ugandan, the only thing that will change for me is that I will have no hope [of resettlement].

Lomba, a woman in her twenties who owned a small shop selling staple Congolese foods such as *pondu* (cassava leaves) and palm oil, made a similar claim. The only real difference between Congolese and Ugandans, she told me, was the fact that "refugees belong to the UNHCR, not to Uganda" (see Moulin and Nyers 2007). Lomba's ambitions were tied to receiving resettlement, "One day, I will be resettled and get out of this place. This is

the hope we [refugees] have. Until then, I must keep this hope alive, or I will be very depressed". In a strikingly similar way to those navigating the asylum system within the United States (Haas 2017), actively waiting for resettlement provided those like Lomba a way of cultivating hope for a better life beyond displacement even as it compounded experience of liminality (El-Shaarawi 2015).

Uncertainty: resettlement as "La Tombola"

Experiences of liminality were shaped by people's pronounced uncertainty about where their file was in the process, how long the "queue" was, or even if there was a queue at all. Put simply, refugees didn't know when or if their time would come. There was also widespread concern that lost paperwork or administrative errors may be holding up cases. Efforts to follow up at the local refugee office were met with at best placation, but often indifference or outright hostility. Refugees frequently made the long – and sometimes expensive – journey to the downtown office of a UNHCR subcontracted NGO tasked with managing resettlement cases only to wait for hours in the sun, heat, and rain (Jensen 2023, 47–68). Many were simply turned away, while those that made it in were often dismissed with scant information or publicly berated by staff for coming without an appointment.

For their part, the officials tasked with managing resettlement casework reported being themselves unsure about the process and overburdened by the sheer volume of demand. One official, for example, lamented that "Dealing with refugee expectations [is] a constant struggle. Refugees see me as someone who can decide who goes and who stays, as if I have the power over life and death". In response, staff reported being strategically ambiguous with refugees about the state of their files, and they used mandatory wait times between appointments and strictly enforced office hours to insulate themselves from refugees. These strategies compounded refugees' frustration and sense of uncertainty. Mamadou, for example, believed that he was in the resettlement pipeline following an interview with a UNHCR representative a year prior. He'd not heard anything since.

Whenever I go [to the office], they say to wait, we will call you. Month after month goes by and nothing. I go back and they say go away, we will call you. This is how it goes: around and around and around.

These encounters confirmed to Mamadou the need to "get out of this country". "God has left this place", he said, indicating that his family "have been here for ten years and nothing has changed. After resettlement, then it will be time to think about a future".

In Kampala, everyday experiences of resettlement added to this uncertainty. While waiting, refugees saw friends, family, and community members depart. At times, these departures seemed quite sudden, such as a family during my fieldwork who were told on a Friday that they would leave early the next week. Why certain people were prioritized over others seemed almost entirely arbitrary to refugees. Elikya, for example, had been in Uganda for almost twenty years. Her son had recently passed away after several years fighting a treatable illness. "We had an interview in 2015, but I've heard nothing since. I used to go to the office to bug, bug, bug them, but they just say to go away, we will call you when you are ready". Pointing down the road, Elikya identified the house of a family who had recently been resettled despite arriving a few years prior, exclaiming

that “it just makes no sense”. The widespread view of selection as essentially arbitrary was a frequent source of complaint and puzzlement, leading refugees to characterize resettlement as “la tombola”, literally meaning the raffle or lottery, i.e. a random process akin to pulling a number out of a box. This framing compounded a feeling of existential liminality, that one’s time could come at any moment.

Mistrust: the corruption criteria

For many of my interlocutors, narratives of “la tombola” also undercut official claims that there was a formal process to resettlement (Ozkul and Jarrous 2021). Instead, the largely Ugandan frontline officials charged with managing refugee cases were assumed to have significant discretion over who was selected but were either indifferent to individual struggles or used this discretion for their own benefit. Paul, for example, complained that “We are always going to the offices, and these Ugandans just tell us, ‘we will call you; we will call you’. Then one month, two months goes by, and nothing”. He believed that the Ugandan staff were intentionally delaying his file to extract money from him and that the UNHCR should replace Ugandans with “mzungus”¹ who “have their money [and] don’t need anything from us” (see Thomson 2012). During a focus group, I asked attendants what they thought led some cases to be prioritized over others. Laughing, the group roundly said that it was the “corruption criteria”. This notion came up constantly in interviews and interactions, often expressed as a joke, but also reflecting deeper views about refugees’ subordinated place vis-à-vis governing institutions and the host society. As an elderly man who had been in Uganda for almost thirty years put it, “Resettlement is only for people with money. If you have money you go. If you don’t, you stay”.

It was widely assumed that people who left had paid a bribe, and several people I met discussed saving money as a strategy of attaining resettlement. It is hard to overstate just how common these accusations and practices were. As one young woman put it, “Ever since resettlement started, you can’t even trust your own brother or sister. Sometimes, it seems like everybody is corrupt”. While these dynamics have been reported in existing scholarship, less attention has been paid to their social ramifications. As implied by the young woman above, both accusations and the reality of corruption erodes social trust, strains social ties, and undermines faith in institutions.

For example, a church that I occasionally attended during fieldwork collected money for a recently widowed community member. The money went missing, and sometime later a prominent elder from the church left for resettlement. It was suggested that he had stolen the money to pay a bribe. I discussed this incident with several interlocutors from the church, and they noted how common such practices had become, saying that resettlement was corrupting leaders and undermining community institutions. They associated such dynamics with a growing sense of “confusion” about who to trust and how to relate to social institutions. To take another example, a group of translators who had worked for the UNHCR during a re-verification program reported that several families came to verify their file only to be told that they had left for resettlement. “No one knows who took their places”, one of the translators informed me, “but it makes you question everyone”.

Alongside corruption, people were frequently accused of lying to gain resettlement, primarily by fabricating stories of risk or elevating appearances of vulnerability.

Interestingly, refugees who expressed this were less concerned with people “jumping the queue” and more with how such acts undermined the dignity of the Congolese community. These narratives centered on Congolese clothes, housing, and lifestyle. During a conversation with a group of men at a cafe, Bosombo made the following statement to much laughter, “Congolese will go to bed hungry but be wearing Versace. This is how we are and it’s why we can never be like [Ugandans]”. I heard versions of this frequently during fieldwork, reflecting academic scholarship on Congolese fashion, identity, and dignity – epitomized by the transnational Congolese subculture of *La Sape* (Gondola 1999). Bosombo went on to say, however, that Congolese were now wearing torn and unwashed clothes because “they think that if you look too good you won’t be resettled”. These comments reflect a common sentiment that while occupying positions of vulnerability and insecurity may gain advantage in the international humanitarian regime, they undermine the social fabric, cohesion, and dignity of the wider community in Kampala (see Ikanda 2018).

Contesting displaced hopes and harms

I’ve argued that the high value placed on resettlement interacts with the reality of limited spaces and entrenched uncertainty to fragment refugees’ ongoing and precarious settlement in Kampala. These harmful effects do not go unchallenged, however. Below, I draw attention to a set of moral and political projects led by community leaders that frame resettlement as corrupting and disempowering of refugee community, and hence seek to repair social ties and re-place refugees’ hopes toward collective life in Uganda.

Moral contestation: resettlement as corrupting

Over ninety percent of Congolese living in Uganda are Christian, the great many “Born Again” and especially Pentecostal. Churches are hence important social institutions in Congolese life, providing one of the few spaces where refugees can engage in placemaking and community-building. Churches also help receive new arrivals by providing temporary shelter, collecting and distributing charitable resources, and facilitating connections to jobs and housing (Cole 2021; Lyytinen 2017). Given their central role, I spent significant amounts of time attending church services, choir practices, elder meetings, men’s groups, and other programming. Services frequently went on for three to six hours and would involve multiple leaders and pastors preaching on a range of topics.

Pentecostals see themselves as engaged in spiritual warfare with evil and the Devil specifically (Pype 2006). It was therefore common to hear pastors preach about the role of the Devil in a great many phenomena, such as ongoing problems in Congo, epidemics of cassava brown streak disease, or the spread of “immorality” and “homosexuality” across the globe. To my surprise, resettlement often emerged as a topic. During one service, for example, Pastor Dan discussed the “the new evil of resettlement”. He told congregants that the Devil was working through resettlement to corrupt community leaders, break apart families, and create idleness. He tied these outcomes to social problems such as drug and alcohol addiction, depression, and suicide. He finished his sermon imploring members to reject the “Devil’s temptation” and “forget about resettlement”. In making this claim, he drew reference to those who had left and not been heard

from since, asking congregants whether this is what they wanted for their brothers, sisters, and children.

During another service, Pastor Joseph discussed an ongoing conflict between several of the church's members and Ugandan government officials over unpaid translation work. He talked about demons working through officials and through the refugee regime, saying that they were trying to steal money and break refugees' spirits. Resettlement, he argued, was not a solution. "There are many faces of the Devil", he proclaimed, "and sometimes he will come offering false hope". Pastor Joseph implored congregants to reject resettlement and instead help build the church and minister to fellow Congolese and Ugandans. During an interview, he stressed to me the harmful effects that resettlement had on his congregants, and in the churches' spiritual and social mission regionally.

Political contestation: resettlement as disempowering

René headed a prominent refugee community organization (RCO) in Kampala. RCOs play an important role as brokers between refugee communities, state agencies, and (I)NGOs. They are also important organizing platforms for refugees. René believed that the best chance of long-term security and stability in Kampala was for Congolese to incorporate into the local economy, build collective power, and demonstrate contribution. He saw refugees' integration into Uganda's national development plan as an opportunity to advance calls for social and political rights. To René, resettlement was an impediment to this goal as it led refugees to see their futures elsewhere. "We will live here for many years to come", he told me, "and so we must believe that a better future is possible. [But] with resettlement, it is a battle to make people see this".

During one of several interviews, René articulated a common view among community leaders that resettlement might be good for the few selected, but that it damaged the community at large:

Nobody can say that it is bad for those resettled. But how many go each year? Maybe 100, 200 from Kampala? But now everybody thinks resettlement is their only solution. People are taking their kids from school, saying that America or Norway don't want educated people. They will wait to be in the US. We have people quitting their jobs or turning down opportunities.

Of particular concern, René reported people "harming themselves and doing crazy things to get resettlement. [...] We have an opportunity right now in Uganda, but instead everybody is focused on getting resettled. This is our challenge". I heard René raise these issues in several settings, including during a speech at an international conference held in a colonial-era country club on the banks of *Nnalubaale* (Lake Victoria). In the speech, René drew a direct line of tension between the ways resettlement encourages refugees to see their future elsewhere and as attached to their individual humanitarian status, and the demands for collective power, community cohesion, and economic participation required to incorporate into Kampala and demonstrate contribution to Ugandans.

Like René, Francois was deeply concerned about the harmful effects of resettlement. Francois headed an RCO focused on advancing civil and political rights for refugees in Uganda. He frequently complained that the "language of humanitarian grievance and vulnerability" centered in resettlement compelled refugees to "stay quiet and wait for

something that will never come". He was also concerned that the prioritization of Congolese fragmented refugees as a political group. I heard him express these views forcefully at a meeting of refugee leaders held in the courtyard of a Congolese-led organization. During the meeting, a Rwandese leader stood up to say that "We know what the UNHCR and Ugandan government want: they want us separate and divided. But we must be refugees first; not Rwandan, Burundi, Sudanese, or [Congolese]". Francois agreed, saying to those assembled that resettlement was a wedge that needed to be rejected and challenged by leaders.

During the meeting, a senior figure in the Congolese Association of Uganda affirmed the views of attendees, saying that resettlement undermined unity and acted as a barrier to political power. I discussed these comments with Alain during an interview several weeks later. Like René, Alain noted the value of resettlement to individual refugees but lamented the ways in which the program reoriented refugees' hopes abroad. "Everybody is saying they will be resettled. We ask them to come to a meeting, to vote, to get involved. They ask, 'Why? My future is not here'". To emphasize the stakes, Alain informed me about a recent incident in southwest Uganda in which a transit vehicle operated by a regional humanitarian agency had crashed bringing refugees to Kampala for interviews. Five Congolese died, and the vehicle operators had left the remaining passengers – including those injured – on the side of the road. "This is the reality we face", Alain exclaimed. "Our future is here in Uganda, not in Europe or America. Uganda is where we will live and many of us will probably die here too". Given this sentiment, Alain had begun planning workshops "to say to our brothers and sisters that we must turn our hope from resettlement. Maybe you will get it one day, but you cannot live your life waiting for it. Our future is here".

Discussion

This paper has examined the ambivalent outcomes of resettlement for Congolese refugees living in Kampala. Extending prior research, it demonstrates how the high value placed on resettlement interacts with the reality of limited spaces and bureaucratic opacity to compound experiences of liminality, uncertainty, and mistrust among refugees. The findings show that the prospect of resettlement becomes deeply embedded in refugees' lives, shaping important life decisions, and orienting them toward a future life "elsewhere". At the same time, the lack of transparency and accountability in resettlement procedures fuels a pervasive mistrust within refugee communities, as people become suspicious of one another's motives and claims to vulnerability. These harms do not go unchallenged, however. The paper highlights how community leaders frame resettlement as corrupting and disempowering and seek to reorient refugees' hopes and aspirations toward collective projects of claims-making, community building, and incorporation.

The paper's key contribution is to move beyond existing research that tends to focus on individual subjectivity, suffering, and trauma to examine how resettlement interacts with and fragments already strained processes of refugee settlement. In this regard, this paper joins calls for a critical rethinking of resettlement as a "durable solution". Alexandre Betts (2017, 74), for example, laments that the goals of resettlement are often vague and the impacts "almost never measured relative to any of [its] putative purposes". He argues that this is because resettlement is treated as "inherently benevolent". The

present study provides qualitative evidence of how this program can paradoxically exacerbate experiences of liminality and generate new and damaging seams of mistrust within communities. By attending to these dynamics, and how they are contested by community leaders, the study suggests that even when resettlement “succeeds” in providing a durable solution for a select few, it may nevertheless undermine the social resources and collective capacities of refugee communities to navigate the challenges of displacement and exile. As such, this paper contributes to insights from critical refugee studies, demonstrating that resettlement can destabilize and fragment refugee communities even as it is intended to “rescue” them (Espiritu 2014; Tang 2015).

Following on from this, my paper explores how resettlement operates within broader systems of population management. Arar and FitzGerald (2023, 15) cite a memo from the World Council of Churches on the limited resettlement program for Chinese refugees in Hong Kong during the 1950s, reporting that “The hope of resettlement abroad helps to reduce the despair and unrest at being hopelessly blocked in Hong Kong”. Similarly, Lipman (2020, 55) shows that hopes for resettlement maintained Vietnamese refugees living in Malaysia in a state of political docility despite grievances regarding their situation. Both examples point to the role of resettlement in promoting/disciplining refugee immobility (see also Boeyink et al. 2025; Hyndman and Giles 2011) and tacitly delegitimizing other routes to refuge, especially asylum-seeking (Betts 2017, 74; Watson 2023, 692). My paper affirms this body of work, demonstrating that the promise of resettlement plays an important role in regulating refugee populations. It also nuances this perspective, however, revealing that while resettlement may discipline refugees into *voluntary* immobility, it can also disrupt projects of settlement in countries of asylum and – paradoxically – foster intense feelings of *involuntary* immobility among those waiting and hoping for resettlement (see Carling and Schewel 2018; Haas 2017; Horst 2006). Both dynamics appear to exacerbate rather than ameliorate experiences of refugeehood and suggest that resettlement can in fact promote migratory ambitions and perhaps even practices.

It is important to emphasize that this paper does not propose a wholesale critique – much less dismantling – of resettlement as a mechanism to redress displacement. Rather, the harmful effects of resettlement seem to primarily originate in the pervasive uncertainty that permeates the administration and experience of this program. As discussed earlier, resettlement is thoroughly structured around the interests of powerful states and to a lesser extent the UNHCR. States retain ultimate discretion over resettlement, reserving the right to select and deny who they want, and to change admissions and priorities year-to-year. This has downstream effects on frontline bureaucrats, who insulate themselves from refugees and develop administrative strategies that many experience as frustrating and dehumanizing. The combined effect is to shroud resettlement prospects and decision-making in uncertainty, exacerbating refugee liminality and generating mistrust. This context also provides fertile ground for extortion, exploitation, and fraud. Future research across different contexts would help specify the contextual factors and administrative arrangements shaping these outcomes. For example, are outcomes different when states resettle whole groups rather than small numbers from larger populations? Are there administrative strategies that diminish the harmful effects of uncertainty on refugees? Can communities be empowered to participate in or even control programs? In answering these questions, the present paper emphasizes the value of centering how refugees themselves experience and contest the fragmentary

effects of resettlement and advance alternative visions of resettlement, refuge, and justice.

Note

1. A Bantu term referring to “foreigners,” but used especially about white people.

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