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## Refuge Routes

### Abstract

The Nakivale refugee camp breeds bustling exchange among ethnic groups.

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**BODA-BODAS**—motorbike taxis—buzz through the streets, seats fully loaded with layers of second-hand cloth. Minibuses offload crates of soft drinks and beer at retail shops. Street vendors hawk soap, matchboxes, and prepaid phone credits in congested markets, while others queue at money transfer booths. Commerce thrives in the business district of Nakivale, Uganda's largest refugee settlement. Since the 1950s, Nakivale has opened its gate to people uprooted

One of many vibrant shops in the Nakivale settlement that help refugees achieve economic independence.

by civil war and persecution. It now houses 62,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, and other neighboring countries. Its ground-level circulation of goods and services has helped maintain livelihoods among the temporary residents—systems often overlooked by Nakivale's international funders.

Professions here tend to follow respectfully along ethnic or national lines. Somali residents, who were predominantly merchants back home, rely almost entirely on informal trade within the settlement. With a majority concentrated within zone Base Camp III, Somalis appear isolated from the other groups, but their trade is interdependent. Rows of tomatoes, potatoes, cabbage, and beans spread out on tables come directly from Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian farmers, who cultivate the land provided in the settlement. In turn, these small-scale farmers buy electronics and cosmetics from Somali traders.

As Congolese hip-hop blares from the two speakers that set

outside the entrance, Henry reclines under a well-worn poster of Jay-Z and Beyoncé. Clearly, trade doesn't just stay within the camp. Once a month, Henry heads to the Ugandan city of Mbarara, where he loads up his USB stick with hundreds of MP3s. Back in Nakivale, he sells to refugees hungry for new music.

Congolese residents like Henry run the business of burning and selling DVDs and CDs to fellow refugees. After work or mass, neighbors kick back to the sounds of traditional Congolese singers like Dindo Yogo or Pépé Kallé and the latest Western pop stars.

Hunger for music may fuel a micro-industry here, but the densest networks have formed between Somalis in Nakivale settlement and Kampala, the Ugandan capital. Refugee traders import milk, pasta, clothing, cosmetics, and medicines. Some own transport businesses too, allowing them to regulate influx and outflux of goods based on settlement demand.

Aisha owns a well-stocked grocery shop in Base Camp III, where she keeps a curious product: tuna cans. The settlement is located next to Lake Nakivale, so there's no short supply of fish. According to Aisha, Somali refugees don't eat the fish from the lake, so she imports canned fish from Dubai, delivered to Nakivale through Somali networks in Kampala via neighboring Kenya. Another Somali favorite, camel meat, also comes from across the border.

Though remote from main commercial hubs, Nakivale's refugees are linked to a variety of local, regional, and transnational suppliers and traders. And not just for import—local Ugandans enjoy Nakivale produce. International donors play an indispensable role in providing land and infrastructure, but the economic systems and resulting interdependence empower those forced away from their homes to carve out a new life. ●