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Questioning the value of 'refugee' status and its primary vanguard: the case of Eritreans in Uganda

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1 Introduction

On its 'figures at a glance' page, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) presents the scale of forced displacement that it currently faces. It details that 'an unprecedented **65.6 million** people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are **22.5 million refugees**, over half of whom are **under the age of 18**' (UNHCR, 2017; emphasis in original). Though the organisation has no panaceas for this situation, they detail the infrastructure they have developed to respond: 10,966 staff members based in 130 countries funded by a budget that 'reached a new annual high of US$7.7 billion in 2017' (*ibid.*). With the scale of displacement laid bare for all to see, the organisation assuages any doubts about what the audience's take home message should be: 'our work at UNHCR is more important than ever before' (*ibid.*).

What this roughly sketched statistical picture nonetheless obscures is the organisation's responsibility not only to respond to the humanitarian components of forced displacement, but also to contribute to the resolution of these situations. With this dual mandate in mind, the statistics detailed above can assume very different significances. On the one hand, the enormity of global displacement may appear less devastating *because* UNHCR discharges a critical role in providing protection for those on the move. Refugee status is seen as the best stepping stone on a path laid by UNHCR, first to immediate security and then to longer-term solutions. From this perspective follows the argument that the organisation must be bigger, better funded and further capacitated to assist anyone whose relationship to their country of origin has been severed.

On the other hand, the growing number of displaced individuals can be read as signalling UNHCR's profound inability to deliver on its mandated responsibilities vis-à-vis solutions. Using data provided by UNHCR and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and thus including 5.2 million Palestinians, the U.S. Department of State (2016) estimated that around 12 million refugees and individuals in refugee-like situations lived in protracted refugee situations at the end of 2015. The average duration of their protracted displacement was 26 years (UNHCR, 2016). Perhaps implicit within this figure is a different story, of UNHCR's endemic inability to provide its beneficiary populations with access to durable solutions. Notwithstanding the enormous difficulties in brokering opportunities for voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement for these populations,[1] and the seeming intractability of many conflicts, this raises several questions about the role of refugee status and its primary vanguard – UNHCR – and about how to redress this situation.

There are those who respond with a reformist agenda. They consider how states and institutions, most notably UNHCR, could uphold their duties more effectively. In these state- and institution-centric accounts, academics interrogate various issues: how have governments been, or how could they be, incentivised to provide refugees with durable solutions? How can UNHCR be encouraged to re-centre its legal obligations and responsibilities? And how can we think more creatively about what durable solutions should consist of for refugees, by emphasising mobility, economic rights and

[1] This is, of course, not solely UNHCR's responsibility. Beyond this, Gale (2008: 539) states that 'durable solutions are premised not only on states' willingness to shoulder the practical and legal responsibilities of integrating refugees and returnees but also on refugees' willingness to avail themselves of these solutions'. In the example of refugees within the Economic Community of West African States, Adepoju et al (2007) documents both phenomena. He details how states resist calls to provide refugees with residency permits because they worry that this will oblige them to replace UNHCR as their primary service-provider, while refugees are reluctant to seize alternative statuses offered to them in case it jeopardises their right to third-country resettlement or leaves them vulnerable to deportation or reduced assistance.

transnationalism? These accounts thus focus on how to reform the existing, institutionalised regime of protection based on refugee status remaining constant (for examples, see Betts and Collier, 2017; Türk and Garlick, 2016; Chimni, 2001; Jacobsen, 2002; Schuck, 1997). They situate the issue as one of flawed implementation, underperformance, and responsibility-shifting in the global asylum infrastructure. If such constraints could be addressed, they argue, the full potential of the refugee regime could be unleashed.

Another approach, however, considers a quite different set of questions. It begins from the oft-noted observation that durable solutions are continually evolving to suit states, rather than refugees (Chimni, 1993). Consider the relatively recent deal that Israel struck with Rwanda and Uganda. The latter states agreed to receive Eritrean and Sudanese refugees in exchange for millions of dollars of grants and ambiguous 'sales' from Israel. In this ostensibly legitimate legal exchange, the winners and losers seem clear. As Jacobsen (2002: 591) notes:

> 'If indeed state-donor relations take the form of a game over funding and resources, the game may be thrown from the start, because states almost never lose. When states act inappropriately towards refugees, denying them their rights, or even abusing them, these actions rarely bring down negative consequences from the international humanitarian system.'

If refugees have thus become objects which are quantified, valued and traded – commodified at its most extreme – then it is clear what direction the re-valuation of refugee status is going in for states but less clear as to what its remaining 'value' is for refugees. Indeed, if asylum is providing only the most minimal of protections – primarily against *non-refoulement* – while failing to facilitate individuals' access to durable solutions or a more expanded set of rights, then are certain groups best served within the refugee regime? Relatedly, if UNHCR is increasingly failing to mitigate against damaging state behaviours and provide durable solutions, so that the number of individuals stuck in Protracted Refugee Situations (PRS) has been on the rise for at least the last decade, then should we continue to support the organisation's expansion? While a range of articles within refugee studies alludes to this angle of enquiry, as the next section will discuss, very few have comprehensively unpacked these questions through exploring the decision-making practices of displaced individuals themselves. This article therefore asks what, for refugees and displaced communities, is the perceived 'value' of refugee status in assisting them to access protection and any longer term solutions?

First, however, I briefly outline how academics have discussed this topic to date, before detailing the approach and methodology behind this study. I then present the various ways in which the interviewees chose to respond to this line of enquiry. More generally their answers contribute to challenging the fairly ubiquitous assumption, identified by Polzer (2009: 95), 'that a discourse of refugee identification and refugee rights, as defined by international conventions, will in all cases be beneficial to the refugees concerned and therefore is desired by them.' Finally, the discussion section brings those perspectives back in dialogue with the overarching questions: about UNHCR's role, about the functions of refugee status, and about the efficacy of the regime that links the two.

2 Avoiding asylum

Here, it appears unnecessary to rehash the many incisive, pointed and hugely important critiques of the refugee regime that have been issued over the past few decades. This section will instead draw upon literature detailing instances when individuals with protection claims have chosen to pursue avenues and statuses other than asylum,[2] and the explanations presented by scholars for this. On the one hand, individuals may decide to enter countries where asylum and refugee status is not an option. Valenta and Jakobsen (2018: 31), for example, discuss the important migration opportunities presented by states within the Gulf Cooperation Council to populations escaping conflict-affected countries. With specific reference to those fleeing the multiple waves of violence in Sri Lanka, they state that 'The Gulf region seems especially to have attracted those who could not or did not want to seek protection in the West during the war'. Despite the widely criticised position of labour migrants within these states, the latter option – of people who 'did not want to seek protection' elsewhere – clearly references a group of individuals who intentionally sought opportunities within the Gulf that allowed them to avoid applying for asylum elsewhere.

On the other hand are those individuals who, when faced with the availability of multiple legal statuses within the same country, including the opportunity to apply for asylum, opt for those other than refugee status. Complex personal, political and structural factors are seen to influence this. As Ordóñez (2008; 2015) documents in the case of undocumented Guatemalan day labourers in the United States, understandings of personal identity, the normalisation of extreme and widespread violence in Guatemala, fears about engaging with government institutions, and unreliable access to information about procedures and processes discouraged individuals from applying for asylum. The negative qualities of the asylum system, and individual's inabilities to align their identities with its prescriptions, resulted in confusion and ambivalence about whether to apply for refugee status when such an option became available.[3] Elsewhere, in her study on Sudanese refugees in Northern Uganda's Moyo District, Hovil (2002) observed individuals using poll tax tickets to regularise their status rather than apply for asylum. Crucially, these documents allowed them to live and work outside of the refugee camps, which were viewed as presenting a less than enticing future.

As this and further examples thus hint at (Bakewell, 2001; Polzer, 2008; 2009), two of the most obvious reasons as to why refugee status may be seen as a second-best option relative to other possibilities concern freedom of movement and employment rights, or restrictions thereof. Using the work of Stepputat and Sørensen, Van Hear (2003: 14) states this plainly: 'people's embrace of the category may be positive for them in the access it may give them to resources; on the other hand, that embrace may be negative in that it may tend to 'fix' people and undermine means of livelihood that depend on mobility.' Janmyr and Mourad's (2017) work on Syrians in Lebanon evidences this dynamic, with families weighing access to employment and residency through local registration and the *kefala* system against putative benefits of refugee status.

[2] In such a context, I use the word 'choice' to imply the availability of other options, not to suggest that decisions about whether to pursue alternative avenues are made in contexts of full access to information or absolute freedom, or that they are equally accessible to all. Gender, class, ethnicity, physical ability, educational levels and many more factors will influence the degree of 'choice' that individuals may exercise. As Long (2015: 3) is quoted as stating below, the ability to avoid refugee status is often reserved for those 'with the power to make other choices.'

[3] My thanks to Angela Remus for drawing my attention to this literature.

In these contexts, part of the objection to refugee status is that it can be seen as ossifying, fixing people in particular legal limbos, physical spaces, psychological states and subject-positions, while all the while marking them out as different. As Long (2015: 3) states,

> 'refugee status is sometimes seen as the least desirable of legal categories, to be avoided by all those with the power to make other choices. This is in part because refugees are perceived to be more at risk for discrimination, and because refugees may enjoy fewer rights than migrants who, for example, can identify themselves as students or business people.'

Connotations and conditions associated with the label can then be seen to work against social and physical mobility, political agitation and change (Banki, 2013), community acceptance and subsequently local integration. People understandably eschew a status that can come so inextricably imbued with stigma, wishing to avoid the impacts that this can have on their self-perception and aspirations (Janmyr and Mourad, 2017). This can be particularly damaging when refugee status is reintroduced or imposed on a community several years after their displacement, when their integration through alternative, often locally embedded channels is already well underway (Bakewell, 2002; Malkki, 1995).

More commonly, however, the label is specifically oriented towards repatriation and thus carries with it an assumption of return. This may be due to 'the attitude of UNHCR and aid agencies which work with an essentialist view of the refugee who, regardless of the local situation, remains someone out of place and waiting to go 'home'' (Bakewell, 2002: 64; Chimni, 2002) or due to legal regimes like that in Uganda, which ostensibly forbid the naturalisation of refugees and several generations of their children. When refugee status is overwhelmingly associated with return, those unwilling to embark on this journey will understandably seek alternatives. And when its acquisition will likely have repercussions for the long-term security of not just your children but also your children's children, its relative merits are understandably weighed up differently.

In this context, the 'contractual' element of refugee status, which enters an individual into a relationship of reciprocity with states and organisations that may in turn require them to perform a particular identity (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010), surfaces as another important consideration when deciding whether to apply for asylum or not. While many of these duties underpin and enhance the refugee regime, which this article is in no way seeking to dismiss in its entirety, the argument nonetheless stands that part of this contract is premised on control, paternalism and indebtness (Polzer and Hammond, 2008; Refugees International, 2006). In this vein, one friend in Asmara explained to me why he would "never" apply for asylum by stating, "people apply to asylum but they don't know you become chained to the system. They do it because it's easy but they don't realise you have to live by their regulations, and for me, I believe that I can make something of the opportunity there [in Europe]. I want the freedom, never to get trapped in those institutions."[4,5] Polzer (2009: 100) therefore states that,

> 'When refugees decide not to live in camps but rather to self-settle and integrate, they are often avoiding not only the specific strictures of the camp setting, but just as much the refugee label and concept itself and the involvement of external institutional actors in their lives.'

[4] All names, except Kifilit's (Cole, 2017), have been anonymised and any characteristics that might identify them removed.
[5] Yone (Male, early 30s), 1st May 2017, Asmara, Eritrea.

And a lack of faith in these 'external institutional actors' does not always engender an immediate desire to sign on their dotted line. Countless examples hint at UNHCR's inability to discharge its mandate in full given often irreconcilable aims, and document the inconsistent outcomes that result. For while the organisation may have started life as an avowedly non-operational actor, decades of adaptation and mandate expansion have resulted in UNHCR's portfolio stretching – 'to promote and extend the international legal framework, to develop and strengthen asylum systems, to improve protection standards, to seek durable solutions, and many other activities designed to ensure the safety and well-being of refugees' (UNHCR, 2014: 17) and ever-growing categories of people. These operational responsibilities, including extensive direct humanitarian assistance, may sit alongside its role as initially conceived - to support and protect refugees when requested by states or individuals, and to assist in the attainment of durable solutions for refugees – but not without significant tension. In documenting UNHCR's failings in Uganda, for example, Kaiser (2005) somewhat rhetorically raises the question of whether the organisation's assistance and protection activities are not on some levels fundamentally incompatible. Muggah (2005) documents similar tensions in Nepal, considering how UNHCR's community development approach and emphasis on a rights-based framework has entangled the organisation in a series of interventions that potentially undermine refugees' access to durable solutions. The conflict between means and ends, given the organisation's growing scope, is thus cast in sharp relief.[6]

Highlighted in this story, and forming the final part of this section's discussion, is that legal and socio-economic protection are now often said to emerge from different regimes. The choice is then placed on individuals to pick which path to go down. According to Long and Rosengaertner (2016: 5), writing on 'Protection through Mobility', 'Current approaches often leave refugees forced to choose between seeking asylum and the protection of the international community (including legal guarantees against refoulement as well as humanitarian assistance) and pursuing autonomy and socioeconomic opportunity through either legal or unauthorized channels.' In briefly detailing a few of the reasons why individuals chose 'to avoid entering the asylum system altogether' (*ibid*.: 4), they also outline some of the alternatives: 'Many prefer to avoid the stigma of asylum-seeker/refugee status if they are able to afford another status—for instance that of a student or business visa holder, or through investment visa routes. Such individuals may only find themselves forced to claim refugee status once personal savings are exhausted' (2016: fn 9). Many different academics thus touch upon this trend of 'avoiding refuge' in passing though, as its confinement to a footnote in this piece by Long and Rosengaertner suggests, it rarely forms a central focus of their work.

As Polzer (2008: 493) therefore summarises, while the ways in which self-representation plays out in refugee contexts has been a frequent target of research,

> What is less studied is when refugees make choices to avoid being registered or categorized (Sommers 2001; see also Bakewell, this volume). In a field that is often concerned with increasing the use of and access to the refugee label as a source of protection, we only rarely seek to understand the reasons why people would want to evade such categorization, and what options exist for protection through alternative routes, such as becoming a 'local'.

[6] Beyond this, Bakewell (2001) raises the ethical question as to whether, due to UNHCR's appropriation of responsibilities that were previously assigned to other autonomous and independent organisations, we might be faced with a crisis of accountability as UNHCR positions itself as both the implementer and the arbiter of disagreement.

This paper responds to Polzer's words as a rallying call, by speaking with displaced individuals to ascertain how they evaluate refugee status relative to other options on the table. While her work explores what statuses and subject-positions have allowed Mozambicans in South Africa to integrate outside of formal asylum channels, this article addresses this topic at a much earlier stage of people's displacement. Those Eritreans I spoke with who had been displaced for longer commented on which statuses had helped them at various stages of their journey, but most of the individuals I interviewed spoke *prospectively*, discussing their sense of what refugee status or alternative opinions would help them achieve in the future. This constituted a route through which to understand ongoing opinion formation, rather than retrospective rationalisations or experiences, which was clearly being influenced by a range of factors, not least the experiences of 'migration pioneers' and peers who were further advanced in these processes. In doing so this article attempts to probe the personal and systemic connections between the 'how' people avoid asylum and the 'why', not simply to identify that this happens as many of the reports do above, and to connect this back to more fundamental questions about the valorisation of refugee status and UNHCR.

3 Methodology

This article is nonetheless limited to discussing the views of a particular population on this issue within a specific set of locations. These individuals' opinions are considered and critical, but also context-specific and far from generalizable. Refugee status is clearly imbued with many different values and uses by the various actors engaging with it, constituting a pathway, a social and a political identity, a way of living, an institutionalised ball and chain, and a critical means of protection and support to name but a few. While this piece therefore asks a question about the relevance and integrity of this status in general, it recognises the intellectual and political danger of trying to answer this question at a level of abstraction too far removed from the empirical experiences of a particular microcosm of displaced life.[7] Contained below are thus the answers of Eritreans I spoke with during the winter of 2016 in Kampala, and during two trips to Asmara in 2017.

Three main reasons explain this choice of population and location. The first was my sense that, though not unique in this regard, Uganda was not primarily a place of immediate onward transit for this population. During their time in the capital, Eritreans would therefore be weighing up various longer-term options. As alternative channels to personal and legal security do exist there, I surmised that some individuals would be exercising choice with regards to whether to apply for asylum or not. The second is the fact that the Eritrean 'community' in Uganda is composed of individuals with heterogeneous migration histories. Some individuals had come almost straight from Eritrea, but others had come from Israel either directly or via Rwanda, had worked in South Sudan but relocated to Uganda when the fighting their intensified, or were long-term visitors from various other states, including Eritrea. For this latter contingent, the visa requirements for them to enter Uganda are among the most accommodating in the world. My hope had been that these diverse migration histories would give rise to diverse views on migration, solutions and refugee status more broadly. And third, why Eritreans? Primarily it is because those leaving Eritrea form part of the largest per

[7] It also recognises the ethical dilemmas of focusing attention on the behaviours of individuals who are avoiding the asylum system. As Polzer and Hammond (2008: 429) state, any act of 'making visible' a population carries the attendant risk that 'it might provide…institutions with ammunition for tightening their systems even more.' As in this case it seemed more as though people were actively opting out of the system, as opposed to hiding from it, and because the Ugandan government was aware of an unregistered Eritrean population, I consider this risk to be much lower than in many of the cases they discuss.

capita movement of people in the world from a country ostensibly at peace. While they therefore leave a context plagued by debilitating, coercive and oppressive conditions, rationales for leaving the country potentially include more future-oriented plans than might be the case for populations escaping contexts of acute, violent conflict.

Much of the research in Eritrea consisted of informal conversations and participant observation. When situations did arise that seemed conducive to a more structured interview format, however, questions followed the same vein as those I asked in Uganda: how do individuals understand the role and value of refugee status? How does it help them find solutions to their forced exile, including relative to other available options? And what expectations does it lead to vis-à-vis access to protection and to durable solutions? Importantly, asking these questions is in no way intended to call in to question the validity of Eritreans' asylum claims. In all cases where people apply for refugee status, the reasons why they left may influence their goals and aspirations once they are in a country of asylum, but the latter should in no way undermine the circumstances of the former. The fact that many people will want to make the most out of an experience of forced displacement is human nature, not a reason for discounting why they originally left their country of origin.

Through empirical research with Eritreans in Kampala and Asmara, this article therefore explores the taken-for-granted portrayal of refugee status as a necessary – or the best suited – gatekeeper to protection and enduring solutions. In doing so it reframes a frequent anxiety in forced migration studies, which centres on the question of whether there is something unique about refugees beyond their legal status which makes them a clear object of study? This research somewhat flips that question, instead asking in what ways displaced individuals perceive that being assigned refugee status would make them different, and what do they understand would follow from this in terms of securities and solutions? The amended focus allows us to explore the role and value of refugee status not through its intended functions but via a grounded, granular analysis of people's attitudes and responses to it. Throughout these discussions, what 'value' might mean was intentionally kept open, to ensure that people's subjective attribution of qualities to this status could find full expression.

The article now proceeds by detailing the diverse values attributed to refugee status in Uganda, and how these subsequently informed Eritreans' decisions about whether to apply for it or not. Despite the varied opinions that surfaced, this makes it readily apparent that applying for asylum remains, perhaps as expected, the *status quo* pathway within Uganda. The discussion, however, returns to the question of whether refugee status constitutes the most desirable option in this situation because of features exclusive to this legal pathway or simply because of the relative inaccessibility or unknown nature of alternatives.

4 Reservations, hesitations

Before presenting people's ambivalence towards this option in Uganda, it is worth briefly reflecting on the reasons why individuals have walked away from refugee status during their journeys there. To clarify the geography, and aside from the small number who fly, Uganda is not the country that Eritreans immediately enter upon leaving their own. Any overland journey requires them to first pass through at least two other countries: Sudan or Ethiopia upon immediately crossing the border, then Kenya or more usually South Sudan. The stories of those in Kampala thus also contained explanations of why they had chosen to continue their journeys, often despite being awarded refugee status in one or more jurisdictions along the way. Half the explanation focused on how individuals

had been informed by friends and relatives that Uganda was a stable and secure place. People had heard that a relatively prosperous Eritrean community existed there, financed by remittances from Juba, and that the government was relatively sympathetic and generous when it came to adjudicating their claims to asylum.[8] The other half of the explanations, however, and somewhat unsurprisingly, centred on the shortcomings of refugee status, including what limited benefits it actually conferred upon individuals in these contexts.

Take Nahom. He had abandoned the asylum process in the camps in Northern Ethiopia half way through his Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure. Observing those around him had made it depressingly obvious that acquiring refugee status would in no way assist him to achieve financial independence or social progress in that environment. For a younger generation, these camps in Ethiopia and Sudan are, as UNHCR staff members emphasised, increasingly becoming spaces of transit. UNHCR employees discussed the position of Eritreans who had been born and raised in these camps, stating "refugee status works for them but for those leaving now, it doesn't." For this latter population, they questioned "If they don't want to be a refugee, why should we call them refugees?" While admitting that this population cannot be returned to Eritrea and thus need some way of defending their residency in a host country, one employee conceded that the restrictions associated with refugee status in the Horn of Africa made it entirely understandable that people moving there would seek to avoid this pathway. Nahom's only reason for re-applying for asylum upon arrival in Uganda, which he was successfully awarded, was that his second wife had been resettled to the United States. Family reunification provided the only means through which to join her.[9]

Finan, a 29-year-old former teacher, was in a similar situation in Kampala, waiting for a reunification request from his brother in Australia. Unlike Nahom, however, it was the absence of physical rather than economic protection that had caused him to leave the first country of asylum. He had spent almost five relatively successful years in Khartoum until increasing incidences of Eritreans being deported back across the border had convinced him, and many others that I spoke with, that he was no longer safe there. He referenced a deal that Sudan had supposedly made with Europe in January 2015 to deport Eritreans, claiming that this meant that now "they hurt Eritreans. Even if you have documents or not, you either pay them or they deport you. That's why many Eritreans come here. I'm one of them."[10] Refugee status was argued to provide no protection from expulsion in this context.[11] As Natnael stated, "Khartoum is Eritrea actually. If the [Eritrean] government wants you, they'll take you so you have to run away."[12] Another young male interviewee said that he had left Eritrea aiming for Sudan, primarily in order to find a job, but that it was unsafe there "as the government can do anything. It is the seventh region of Eritrea, that's what people say." He had then fled to South Sudan for work, only to find that it was also too dangerous to remain there.[13]

[8] While this had certainly been the case at certain points over the preceding few years, by the time of my fieldwork, recognition rates had plummeted to roughly 15% of asylum applications. These migratory movements thus often appeared to have responded to outdated information, not real time data on the situation of Eritreans in Uganda.
[9] Nahom (Male), 16th December 2016, Nakulabye, Kampala, Uganda.
[10] Finan (Male, 29), 7th December 2016, Kampala, Uganda.
[11] The regime in Khartoum was seen as having limited autonomy from the Eritrean authorities, which were described as "like a hungry hyena, they just want to swallow you. It is merciless." (Natnael (Male, 42), 18th December 2016, Nakulabye, Kampala, Uganda.)
[12] Natnael (Male, 42), 18th December 2016, Nakulabye, Kampala, Uganda.
[13] Tomas (Male, 33), 14th December 2016, Bunga, Kampala, Uganda.

Reasons for moving on from Sudan and Ethiopia were thus of course irreducibly personalised, but invariably contained a mix of individuals not wanting to see their opportunities atrophy in refugee camps, where they would have to live as "parasites" off remittances from relatives outside,[14] and not trusting refugee status as a bulwark of legal and physical protection. For the men and women I interviewed therefore, refugee status had thus far on their journeys failed to present sufficient opportunities or assurances of protection to instil the confidence needed to stop moving. Once in Uganda, however, the narrative was different. People's overwhelming reason for shunning the system was that the perceived values of refugee status were more than outweighed by the enormous exasperation that accompanied engaging with the seemingly broken institutions of asylum.

Frustration

Respondents were infuriated by how you had to access refugee status, *who* got to access it, and by what actually followed from its successful attainment. Over lunch with Helen and her son one day, who formed a family of two sharing the compound with one of my research assistants, I asked what she had done with her recent rejection letter, wondering whether we might be able to scan the document and together make better sense of a process she saw as entirely opaque. Her response was to laugh, and then state that the rejection letter no longer existed. Helen had been so pissed off at the whole process that, with some satisfaction, she had used the document to light her stove. After a year of waiting for a response from the Ugandan authorities and then receiving this incomprehensible reply, she had decided not to bother re-approaching them. As all the system did was "aggravate her", not least because she saw no value in engaging with corrupt individuals and institutions, she had thus chosen to achieve peace of mind through boycotting these procedures altogether.[15]

Similarly, when meeting a friend at the Ugandan government's main building for processing asylum requests in Kampala, the Office of the Prime Minister (herein OPM), I found him with an acquaintance who was three weeks in to trying to get the names of her husband and dad switched on her reunification application. This administrative fault was preventing her from joining the former in London. She had arrived at the office at 2pm and when I arrived at 5.30pm, she had just been told that the office was now closed for the day. As each nationality of refugees is allocated a specific day each week when their queries will be addressed, her request was simply rolled over to the next session reserved for Eritreans. She had not yet succumbed to giving the OPM staff a bribe, despite knowing that this would massively expedite the process, but was seething about how staff at the organisation "kill your money and kill your time."[16] Had there been no tangible benefit to her continuing in this process, she would simply have walked away.

The financial burden of applying for asylum was highlighted and condemned in almost every interview I conducted. When I asked Sam, a father of two who had spent eight years in Uganda with his wife and kids, whether he had been asked for money during the process of applying for asylum, he just sneered: "everything started with money, from the beginning, money is where we start."[17] The majority of others I spoke to corroborated this: "If you don't pay at OPM, you don't get seen. You're just told to come back another day".[18] A contact who works for an advocacy organisation in Kampala speculated that OPM tries to make the processes excessively convoluted so that people

[14] Filimon (Male), 22nd May 2017, Asmara, Eritrea.
[15] Helen (Female), 15th December 2016, Busiga, Kampala, Uganda.
[16] Mary (Female, late 30s), 23rd November 2016, OPM Office, Old Kampala, Kampala.
[17] Sam (Male), 16th December, Nakulabye, Kampala.
[18] Merhawi (Male, 29), 7th December 2016, Kampala; Robel (Male), 12th December 2016, Kasanga; Metkel, 15th November 2016, Kampala.

will capitulate to paying a bribe to be seen. He stated "they close the door, and then they open the window. You creep up to that and push through your money, and then you find you can enter."[19] For many, this corruption left the refugee system in Uganda defunct of legitimacy. It ensured that while anyone with money could buy status, many 'real' refugees who could not afford it were left unsupported.[20]

Disillusioned by this sense of its unjust and elitist qualities, several people I spoke to had thus simply shunned the asylum process altogether.[21] Ten months after arriving from Juba, Feven had still not set foot in the Old Kampala Police Station (OKPS) where asylum claims must first be registered. Every Eritrean she had spoken to about the process complained about being asked for money at the Police or OPM, and that claims never prove successful without some money to grease the wheels. Applying for asylum was thus both a waste of time and an expense that she was not willing to pay. Instead, and for now, she paid the local Chairman 10,000 Ugandan shillings for a photocopy of her friend's residency card and thought that would suffice. Aside from the process, however, which was just too corrupt for her to be bothered with right now, she did not see any negative aspects to asylum. She recognised that it might enhance her security, particularly by allowing her to walk the streets without fear of arrest, and that to have a confirmed legal status was tantamount to having the right to be counted: "to have refugee status, it is to have an identity". She related her view to me that it was mainly stubbornness that resulted in many Eritreans mistakenly not applying for asylum[22] and that the day after she encountered a problem moving around Kampala would be the day she applied for status.[23]

A similar resentment had led Senait, a single mother of two, to give up on refugee status. She had fled from her abusive husband in Eritrea, a man she had been married off to aged 15 and without her consent, and arrived in Uganda with no support network and stalked by the active disapprobation of her relatives back home.[24] After spending days at OPM without being seen, she was eventually told that she would need to give the staff a small tip if she wanted an appointment. Succumbing to this request allowed her to finally register her asylum claim, but she was unable to make all the RSD meetings because she had nobody to provide child care to her kids and was too afraid to take them on the *boda boda* [motorbike taxi] to the office in Old Kampala. Similar expenses and difficulties confronting individuals seeking to access services for refugees have been noted elsewhere (Anderson, 2012). When she finally did return to OPM, the staff scolded her for waiting so long and then informed her that her file was no longer available. Her hypothesis, somewhat stoked by my research assistant's encouragement, was that her application had been successful and sold to the

[19] Abrar (Male, late 30s), 15th December 2016, Kampala
[20] Senai (Male, 33), 29th November 2016, Kampala.
[21] Mikal recounted a story whereby she had gone back to OPM to appeal a rejected asylum claim after a delay extended by the birth of her little boy and had been told that she was no longer on the system. She tried to begin the process again, but had gotten confused by the protocol and thus was in a situation of not knowing where she stood in the asylum process. As a result, "it's been a year since I went to OPM", she said, "I've given up. If they'd give me the documents, I'd love to go." (Mikal (Female, 30), 18th December 2016, Bunga, Kampala.)
[22] A number of other interviewees acknowledged that the frustrations with OPM were not purely of OPM's creation. As Futsom said, whether due to a lack of knowledge about how the organisation worked, language barriers or their own cultural tendencies, Eritreans did not respect timelines and allocated slots at OPM and often failed to fulfil the instructions they were given. They would then regurgitate asylum claims that they have acquired or bought from other Eritreans, undermining their likelihood of being granted asylum because the genuine nature of their stories was cast in doubt. (Abrar (Male, late 30s), 15th December 2016, Kampala)
[23] Feven (Female, 28), 13th December 2016, Muyengo, Kampala.
[24] This took the form of abusive online messages, and her parents instructing Senait's siblings not to send her any money to assist with her journey or first few months in Uganda.

highest bidder in her absence. Thinking that the only way forward from this would be to buy another status, at around $700, she had simply stopped going to OPM. She saw little point in playing their games and putting up with their violence:

> "they speak to you roughly. They say things to you to make you scared and you lose your confidence to defend yourself. […] You go there in vain, spending your money there. I really gave up on that one."

She added that she had experienced inappropriate behaviour by OPM staff on multiple occasions. Employees had insinuated that if she would 'spend time with them', they might be able to expedite the process for her. She clarified, "you can't lean on the government in Uganda. If you are female, they just ask for your body." It was thus never through any formal status that she had achieved security in Uganda. Her house was registered under the name of a Ugandan lady under whose wing she had been taken, and her neighbours ensured the security of their areas. Senait nonetheless claimed that "if you could get status and work in Uganda, you wouldn't travel to the ocean and risk your life." For now though, the 'ends' of asylum were not for her outweighed by the abusive and demoralising means of getting it.[25]

The situation appeared equally demoralising for those individuals arriving from Israel, or who looked as if they had earned money between leaving Eritrea and arriving in Uganda. Individuals within the former contingent claimed that the staff at OKPS and OPM knew that they had come from Israel, and simply dismissed their claims by saying "you have money [referring to the $3500 they are given by the Israeli authorities before they 'depart'], you can live through the money, you don't need the paper." Though one interviewee I spoke to in this position, Aron, was desperate 'to get a process' – shorthand for any opportunity that allowed individuals to leave Africa through legal means – he was unprepared to fight this attitude at the authorities.[26] John's story was similar. After having been 'greased' by a small but frustrating fine, the Eritrean interpreter at OKPS had allowed him to sketch his story. Upon hearing that this had taken John via Israel, the interpreter denied that his asylum claim could have the necessary political dimension: "what political problems do you have in your country? You have no political problem there." Feeling that his claim would never have been taken seriously, and worried that continued contact with the authorities would result in the further depletion of his $3500, he thus abandoned the process. He instead bought a Resident Identity Card for Mengo Parish so that he could at least move relatively freely on Rubaga Road.[27] He was aware that this would not offer the elusive 'security' people want, as it offered neither legal opportunities for work nor full protection from the police, but it offered a much cheaper and immediate solution to his lack of papers and movement rights. Another man, perhaps not helped by a mouthful of gold teeth, recounted how OKPS had refused even to register him. After weighing up his appearance, he was told "you are a business man, not a refugee."[28] As in other noted cases (Janmyr and Mourad, 2017), the appearance of 'vulnerability' was important for refugees' precarity to be considered legitimate. Beyond the cases of John, Senait and Feven were many more who reasoned that it was better to try their luck without refugee status than to be constantly battling the procedures, people and prejudices that stood between them and the granting of asylum.

[25] Senait (Female, 22), 4th December 2016, Kampala.
[26] Aron (Male), 20th December 2016, Bunga, Kampala.
[27] John (Male, 28), 30th November 2016, Kampala.
[28] Male, late 40s, 25th November 2016, Old Kampala, Kampala.

Thwarted expectations

Those Eritreans who had received status did little to change this opinion. Disappointment amongst this community was rife. On the one hand, some unrealistically high expectations undeniably contributed to this. For those for whom the acquisition of refugee status was synonymous with access to training, employment, funds, housing and educational opportunities, it is unsurprising that they felt let down by the actual result: a nominal set of rights but no automatic set of benefits. One disabled woman, Sarah, who had been living in a refugee camp in Uganda for upwards of five years responded to my question about the benefits of refugee status by saying, "I have full status but there is nothing. You can't get anything out of it." Though she did not have to pay rent in the refugee camp, the housing units barely met basic living standards and she lacked the capital, capacity and support to upgrade hers. Half a decade in this sub-standard housing had, she argued, only exacerbated her already poor health.[29] Another lady who had received refugee status in 2010 complained that it did not come with the travel document and freedom of movement that she had, quite reasonably, anticipated. When she had approached OPM to address this, presuming that it was an administrative oversight as opposed to an institutionalised policy, she was told "we don't give Eritreans travel documents. If you want to move, go back to your country."[30]

Others criticised refugee status for appearing more akin to a dead end in their journey than a protective or facilitative step. One young couple wryly commented that refugee status may provide more opportunities for individuals to move their lives forward "but only like luck does."[31] As such, even individuals with refugee status continued to seek out "shortcuts". One interviewee explained the development of this mentality as follows. There is no evidence that Eritreans are being resettled from Uganda, and the overwhelming majority oppose return to Eritrea. Meanwhile, they are being harassed by the Ugandan police for bribes as the authorities know that Eritreans rarely possess the right documentation or awareness of their rights. So then people begin to think: why should I bother with this system here, vying to be awarded a status – or living uncomfortably with one – that offers no durable solutions, no way out? Then, with friends disappearing from the pool table and cropping up a few months later on their Facebook feeds smiling in some European destination, the institution of asylum in Uganda comes to seem like an institution solely designed to slow you down. He said that the disappointment with the system in Uganda would not discourage him from applying for asylum upon arrival in Europe, but that refugee status in Uganda was not enabling individuals to achieve anything and was thus no longer a worthwhile option. If you have risked a huge amount to leave your country, he was clear – much in line with the UNHCR employees' discussions of the camps referenced above – that being offered an opportunity to 'tick over' was not enough.[32]

Sam echoed these sentiments, voicing his frustrations that refugee status did so little to move things forward. I said that it was intended perhaps to save and protect life, but not necessarily to enhance it. He replied that "Saving life is meaningless. You need to make your children better than you. If you can't do that, only to save life is nothing. You're on this planet for a limited time."[33] Many individuals thus spoke of friends who had left Uganda to head to Libya, despite having made a conscious decision not to embark on that route upon first leaving Eritrea. The sense of waiting, the difficulty of finding jobs, the frustrations with OPM had consigned them to packing up again and

[29] Sarah (Female, late 20s), 15th December, Kampala.
[30] Female, late 50s, 5th December 2016, Kampala.
[31] Selam and Henok, 12th December 2016, Kampala.
[32] Metkel, 23rd November 2016, Kampala.
[33] I asked who he felt should be responsible for making things better and he said "Me, but I need access to make life better. The primary responsibility is me but this is not my country so I can't make things better." (Sam (Male), 16th December, Nakulabye, Kampala.)

trying their luck to reach Europe. I asked Finan if he had any plan for his life in Uganda. He replied "my dream is to be legal, and to be legal at the moment you have to take risks." I asked if those risks involved heading North. He replied "here, nobody has a plan. You just wait for an opportunity. If you have stress 100% you go to Libya. If you have stress 40%, you stay here."[34]

Only one family unit out of the approximately 50 individuals and families I interviewed for this research in Uganda therefore suggested that they could imagine building a life there. While many maintained that they would ultimately love to return to Eritrea, they could not foresee eking out their exile in Uganda in the meantime. Though Sam and his family had been in Uganda since 2008,[35] he maintained that "this life is temporary." As he said, "people come here as a refugee to transfer on to somewhere else. You cannot make the final place to stay here, but there are no chances. […] Status is good but it doesn't help you get a job. Getting status is not the final solution." As such, "it seems like the only solution is to leave from Uganda."[36]

Political reverberations

Departing from these process- and experience-based dismissals of refugee status, a third reason that people vacillated when applying for asylum related to how their claims might be perceived by others. Specifically, they worried about the political effects of seeking asylum, and how this might impact upon their reputations. As with many refugee communities, there were several individuals who voiced concerns about whether their choice to apply for asylum would have dangerous ramifications for them or their families back home. Natnael, whose family was still in Asmara, fell into this category. He surmised that should he apply for asylum and the Embassy find out, they would create problems for his relatives back home. In South Sudan, which he had entered – like Uganda – using his Eritrean passport, he had regularised his stay through a white paper issued by the Eritrean Embassy. To secure this document, however, he had had to pay the 2% diaspora tax, an act which he deeply resented. This decision, premised on maintaining favourable terms with the Eritrean government, was nonetheless the best one for him and his family.[37] Only a resettlement opportunity would sway him otherwise.[38]

Beyond this, other considerations concerning the reputation of individuals and Eritrea came through in interviews. Given the granting of asylum is premised on failures of governance or protection in the country of origin, several individuals worried about applying for it because of the message this might send about the situation back in Eritrea. They felt it painted them as "disloyal to the

[34] Finan (Male, 29), 7th December 2016, Kampala, Uganda.
[35] In 2008, when Sam and his family arrived, recognition rates for Eritrean refugees stood at almost 100%. This has not always been the case. Between December 2007 and December 2009, when most claimants cited religious persecution as the reason for fleeing Eritrea, at least 96% of all Eritrean's asylum claims in Uganda were recognised. Over the next four years, under one-fifth of Eritreans' asylum claims were successful. Recognition rates increased again to around 80% for 18 months from mid-2013 to December 2014 when they once again plummeted to around 15% for the next two years when claimants began being largely dismissed for failing to prove a 'well-founded fear' (Statistics obtained in person from OPM, November 2016).
[36] Sam (Male), 16th December, Nakulabye, Kampala.
[37] It is nonetheless worth stressing, as many a European government is well aware, that possessing refugee status legitimately and retaining links with the Eritrean authorities are not mutually exclusive endeavours. As one Eritrean human rights defender in Kampala said, it was not unusual for people to have refugee status in one pocket and their Eritrean passport in another. They pay the 2% tax to ensure the security of their families and assets back home, as a form of insurance or protection within the domestic context, while asylum keeps their options open for a future outside of Eritrea, which they fled due to genuine concerns about their safety and well-being inside. The two thus seem entirely compatible, forming complementary strands of an overarching strategy to secure economic and social protection.
[38] Natnael (Male, 42), 18th December 2016, Nakulabye, Kampala.

government [in Asmara]" whilst positioning them "as instruments for other governments" intent on delegitimising the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Compounding this was the concern that people back home really looked down upon those who sought asylum upon leaving, as refugee status was seen to feed in to Western narratives denigrating the country.[39] A sizeable minority of my interviews in Asmara suggested that such concerns were not entirely unwarranted, in part because such high levels of political, structural and economic violence appear to have become normalised within the country. Particularly pronounced within the older generation there, but also voiced by a surprising number of young people, was a resentment directed at those who had left for legitimate economic reasons but ended up – in their views – falling back on political asylum.

Even one Eritrean who was offering translation services in Kampala, and was himself a refugee, accused other Eritreans who had left the country as being "driven by selfishness". He shrouded their leaving in a cloak of personal deficiencies, because they could not tolerate the situation in Eritrea or envisage a way of changing it. In the process, however, he blamed them for abandoning elderly parents and relatives, and significantly weakening the critical force needed to initiate a political shift in Eritrea.[40] As another man living in Soya said, "if everyone leaves, the change is not going to come." He too moaned that the 'fashion' of mass migration was undermining the structure of families, which he argued could not remain strong in the face of global dispersal for long, and weakening the prospects of reform in Eritrea.[41] While applying for asylum in other contexts has therefore been seen as playing a political role in weakening states in countries of origin, it was cast within this worldview as an almost selfish act, one that allowed the PFDJ to remain strong.

Relatedly, a few individuals voiced the opinion that asylum was the reserve of those who had not clearly planned their movements. One Eritrean businessman from Juba, who I met in Kampala seeking unpaid wages from a boss who had 'temporarily relocated' to Uganda, responded to my question about whether he would apply for asylum by saying "No, my mind is busy about my money and my family and I can't be patient for two to five years – I don't want to paralyse my mind." He was not tempted by resettlement opportunities, saying "there is nothing for me in Canada and Europe." Critical to him were opportunities for work and, in his mind, refugee status would do little to enhance them. The value of refugee status as he saw it was that it enabled people to inject purpose into their journeys. "When people don't have a plan, they apply for asylum."[42]

Emma's blurring of the line was similar. He had had his asylum claim rejected three times before it was conclusively dismissed by OPM the week before I spoke with him. On the letter that informs individuals of this decision, six possible reasons are listed for why the claim can be dismissed. In his case, two of these were circled: the authorities could not see that he had any credible reasons to fear remaining in Eritrea, and they were not convinced by his story of why he first fled. He was still reeling from the shock of this pronouncement, confused by the randomness with which stories seemed to be dismissed or granted protection, but yet determined to re-appeal this dismissal because "without that paper, you cannot move." When the translator at OPM asked him for money he replied "but I said, if I have money why would I come here? I'm asking for asylum to get by, to get a job," perhaps revealing much about how he understood refugee status. Affirming this he said that if he had $800 to buy refugee status, why would he bother seeking asylum? He would not need its protection if he had that kind of disposable money, or a career that had panned out.[43] To him, and a

[39] Senai (Male, 33), 29th November 2016, Kampala.
[40] Tesfai (Male, early 30s), 21st December 2016, Kampala.
[41] Male, mid-30s, 21st December 2016, Soya, Kampala.
[42] Natnael (Male, 42), 18th December 2016, Nakulabye, Kampala, Uganda.
[43] Emma (Male), 14th December 2016, Kampala.

handful of other exclusively male respondents, refugee status was thus a fall back, a last ditch option when other routes had been exhausted. While such a view was held by a small number of other respondents, the next section largely details another rendering of this story: because individual needs are significant, and alternative options few, many Eritreans valorised refugee status as the only – albeit imperfect – available route to assistance, stability and solutions.

5 Asylum and its advantages

Before detailing the complimentary yet somewhat ambivalent perspectives on asylum that many respondents provided, it is important to first emphasise that several individuals noted the unconditional importance of refugee status. Over coffee one day in downtown Asmara, to provide one example, I asked a good friend what he, and in his opinion Eritreans more generally, thought of refugee status. He replied that it was "the dream", the best thing you could hope for. I replied by explaining that the responses in Uganda had been more varied; people spoke of the relative benefits of work permits, student visas,[44] residence permits and temporary illegality as well. My friend suggested that either these options are not known to many people before they leave or they seem completely unattainable. Refugee status on the other hand is widely understood by him and those he knew to regularise individuals' stays in host countries while providing access to protection, whatever that may be.[45] Indeed, even within Uganda, the expansive and elusive qualities of 'protection' and 'security' were central to people's desire to acquire refugee status, as the next section will discuss.

Protection and security

The sense that refugee status was imbued with some form of protective power or authority was unsurprisingly widespread. For only a small minority, however, was this protection envisaged as *from something*. Senai, for example, hoped that refugee status might assist him in getting a job in Kampala, but he had primarily applied for it in anticipation that it would afford him some protection from the PFDJ's abuse while he served as a political mobiliser in Kampala.[46] OPM staff held that even if refugee status would provide few Eritreans with opportunities for durable solutions, unless they had people outside waiting to support them, it did at the very least continue to provide them with legal and physical protection. Because "they are different, their complexion is different", staff members acknowledged that Eritreans are known to be targeted as they travel around Kampala and so refugee status does allow them to move more freely.[47]

For others, and particularly single mums, 'protection' was largely a proxy for social and economic support. In particular, refugee status was understood to open the door to the refugee camps, which would take care of their accommodation needs, translate into free schooling for their children and open up other opportunities for sponsorship or resettlement.[48] One 38-year-old lady indeed spoke of

[44] Bonfiglio's (2016) work, and to a lesser extent Long's (2010), discusses this in more depth, highlighting how those who can pursue educational opportunities rather than applying for asylum often do. In the case of Bonfiglio's work in Uganda, Congolese interviewees then made a point of stressing that they were 'international students' and not refugees.
[45] Filimon (Male), 14th April 2017, Asmara, Eritrea.
[46] Senai (Male, 33), 29th November 2016, Kampala.
[47] OPM Staff Member, 7th December 2016, OPM Office, Old Kampala.
[48] Harnet (Female, late 20s), 29th November 2016, Kampala.

how important it was to keep one foot in Kampala and one foot in Nakivale refugee camp.[49] When livelihood options dried up in Kampala, she would simply return to Nakivale. Overall, however, given the isolating and depressing environment within the camp, she preferred to live in Kampala.[50] Another lady I spoke with in Bunga, who lived alone with her three young children, had nonetheless, for the positive features associated with the camps, recently initiated an asylum application after five years in Uganda explicitly avoiding it. Sofia's domestic work in the houses of single Eritrean men coming and going from Juba had of late dried up, so she needed a new livelihood and the documentation required to support that. When I asked how refugee status constituted that livelihood or documentation, she replied: "This is a country that is not our home. Full status would help me go to the camp. I asked so many times if I could go, and they refused. But it would help the kids go to school." Exacerbating these financial worries was the guilt she felt for staying in Kampala without the financial means to support herself, especially given Eritrean acquaintances would challenge her by asking, "why are you always asking for money? Why don't you just go to the camp?" To this she could only reply: "I work, it has no value. I get money, it has no value. I wish I could go the camp."[51]

Refugee status was nonetheless also held to enable further opportunities within Kampala. It meant government offices had to serve you, you could enter banks and open accounts, you could access travel documents that allowed you to work in Uganda and neighbouring states, and you could apply for jobs knowing that you had the legal right to accept an offer should it come your way.[52] And it enabled individuals to access the resources of UNHCR and other organisations, which had extremely important personal dividends for some. Ariam's husband had disappeared after becoming entangled in the gum arabic business in South Sudan, leaving her with four children including a breastfeeding infant whose demands prevented her from working. Through the process of applying for asylum in Kampala, UNHCR's main Implementing Partner in Uganda – Interaid – heard about her situation and provided her with three month's rent and food money. She remained hopeful that being granted asylum would pave the way for her to receive a further grant from UNHCR to establish some form of small business.[53] It was UNHCR that had also 'saved' Almaz. She had been abandoned in Kampala by her South Sudanese partner with their two mixed race children. Turning to the Eritrean community had yielded no support, as her culturally objectionable marriage resulted in widespread ostracisation. When she lost the one job she could find with an expatriate employee who did not care about her inter-racial marriage, UNHCR supported her at the Church where she slept rough with her children and retrieved the documentation necessary to prove her refugee status.[54] The organisation was now seeking resettlement opportunities for her family, giving her hope that she would soon be able to take the children somewhere they faced less prejudice.

Intimately related to this more encompassing concept of 'protection' was the narrower one of 'security' that was often invoked. This appeared to be understood in two main ways, both concerning people's desire to exercise fundamental rights: the first being the security to move without fear, and the second being the security to work without the fear of deportation. On the latter point, the importance of full status for securing the legal right to work and retain that employment was absolutely critical for most people. One man in his early twenties living in Bunga, who had

[49] During our interview, she had a blazing disagreement with her son. She absolutely prohibited him from getting a job in Kampala because she was staunchly opposed to him saving money to fund a journey to Libya. He maintained that that was not the reason for his seeking employment in Kampala but the battle was fierce and, on this occasion, he retreated.
[50] Female, 38, 19th December 2016, Kampala.
[51] Sofia (Female), 19th December 2016, Bunga, Kampala.
[52] Female, late 50s, 6th December 2016, Kampala.
[53] Ariam (Female), 19th December 2016, Kampala.
[54] Almaz (Female), 27th November 2016, Kampala.

'voluntarily departed' Israel and left behind a job in fishing that he had found largely enjoyable, solely wanted refugee status so that he could find work in Uganda and stay firmly put: "if you have work, everything is nice." His understandable fatigue with being shunted around was clear, and he had no desire – unlike most people he knew – to keep moving.[55] It was the words of a young lady over coffee one day, however, which most encapsulated why refugee status was here considered so important. She stressed that "even if you have status, you might not get a job but *at least you have a chance*" (emphasis added) because employees almost always check you have "full status" before they hire you.[56]

As noted extensively elsewhere, 'work' was also associated with manifold benefits beyond financial need. It made the journey make sense retrospectively; it made the risks seem worth it as people could be 'moving forward' in terms of having secured a job in a competitive environment. As friends in Eritrea and Asmara constantly told me, even if you do not make money in your job, you have to keep busy. Without this focus and psychological respite, days are whiled away thinking and feeling anxious. Once again, however, the line was often slightly blurred in these conversations between people anticipating that refugee status would guarantee them the right to seek employment in Uganda, and refugee status providing people with an actual job within the country. With full status, people declared that UNHCR would supposedly assist you to start a business, support you with health problems if you had them, and help pay for your children's school fees.[57] All were possibilities, but ones very far from the likely end of the spectrum.

Foreshadowing the value people placed on refugee status for providing the security to work or even a job itself, however, was the oft-praised fact that asylum provided security of movement and residence. Ugandan authorities, including the police and Kampala Capital City Authority, were widely described as being excessively exploitative and abusive to those without any status, aware as they were that bribes can be readily extracted from any legally vulnerable population hoping to avoid excessive scrutiny. Across the border in Nairobi, the same dynamics have been widely noted (Hough, 2013). Refugee status[58] was held up as the best means for establishing a degree of security in interactions with these actors. One older lady, Keren, said that she could not even look for work because she was so afraid that walking the streets to find it would expose her to the authorities' harassment. As she could not afford to bribe her way out of their snares, she was spending most of her time confined at home.[59] She saw refugee status as the only real antidote to this problem. Similarly, several Eritreans who had savings from their time in South Sudan or Israel positioned refugee status as an essential prerequisite to confidently investing in business ventures in Uganda.[60] The ability to move with a reduced fear of harassment was thus a much valued component of the security seen to arise from a regularised asylum status.

A third, albeit much less discussed, aspect of security concerned its psychological dimensions. As Mehret stated, full status allows you to move on with your life: "with full status, you think about

[55] Male, late 20s, 20th December 2016, Bunga.
[56] Female, late 20s, 29th November 2016, Kampala.
[57] Female, late 20s, 29th November 2016, Kampala.
[58] Interestingly, this interviewee said that it did not matter here whether the status was fake or real. Unlike with UNHCR and Interaid, who could verify refugee status through their databases and thus who would deny assistance to those who had simply forged a refugee identification card, the police or KCCA had few ways of checking these cards. Some individuals with ambitions to stay in Uganda longer therefore bought ID from OPM for anywhere between $700–1000 simply to avoid the authorities' regular attempts to extort them. (Mary (Female, late 30s), 23rd November 2016, OPM Office, Old Kampala, Kampala.)
[59] Keren (Female), 6th December 2016, Kampala.
[60] Visit to a human rights monitoring organisation, 16th November 2016, Kabalagala, Kampala.

your life and your work only. You do not worry about long days at OPM and rejections." She clarified: "As an asylum seeker, you think in three month intervals. Refugee status is for five years, so you can start thinking and moving freely, otherwise you are just always thinking about the rejection letter from OPM."[61] For Sam, the granting of refugee status to him and his family eight years before had served as "a guarantee. You can move as a citizen. You feel satisfaction."[62] Tomas repeated something similar. When I asked how refugee status would help him, he started with the quotidian – that you can open a bank account – but then expanded to "You can live like a programmed person. I can schedule things. I can go to government offices with confidence. We are like a shadow without it, you are a hidden person." To him, its absence forced individuals to embody 'shadowy' qualities, traversing the city in ways that would attract as little attention as possible, particularly within a Ugandan population that inherently "don't trust you because you're a stranger." He thus saw no negatives to refugee status: "we have the shelter here but full status makes things easier. We need to have it."[63]

Resettlement and family reunification

In terms of people moving forward with their lives, for many individuals the attainment of refugee status equated to moving one step closer to resettlement, which remained their ultimate goal.[64,65] Neither local integration in Uganda nor repatriation to Eritrea were feasible or desirable, rendering these durable solutions irrelevant for their plans and largely absent from our discussions. For Kidane, a 66-year-old man hoping to join his wife in Sweden, the primary value of refugee status was "for the process". In the meantime, however, it provided a means to stay within a country that provided both freedom and shelter: "Eritreans come here especially for the shelter. If you find work it is good but if not, you want shelter to save your life." Another family, who had for decades been split across three countries, now found themselves almost entirely reunited in Adelaide. When the mother and daughters finally located the father in Kampala in 2014, they had encouraged him to apply for asylum so that they could begin to file the documentation needed for his passage to Australia. For them, the fact that refugee status allowed families to be reunited constituted its one, immutable value.[66,67] The same could be said for many of the single mothers I spoke with in Kampala, who too pinned their hopes on this latent possibility of refugee status. With husbands in Juba, Khartoum or making their way to Europe, these women were biding their time in the relative security of Uganda until they were beckoned by their partners to join them elsewhere.

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[61] Mehret (Female, late 50s), 6th December 2016, Kampala.
[62] Sam (Male), 16th December 2016, Nakulabye, Kampala.
[63] Tomas (Male, 33), 14th December 2016, Bunga, Kampala.
[64] One Eritrean translator presented a psychological rationale behind this obsession on resettlement, musing on why Eritreans "try to use refugee status as a stepping stone." Part of this fixation, he reasoned, was to justify a host of ill-conceived decisions that people had made up to that point: "Emotionally, psychologically, we are hurt. We don't have morale. We don't know why we came here." Confronted with that angst, people pinned hopes on resettlement as a means to radically change their lives. (Male, 21st December 2016, Kampala).
[65] Female, late 50s, 6th December 2016, Kampala.
[66] Two sisters (one late 20s, the other early 30s), 9th December 2016, Rubaga Road, Kampala.
[67] When I asked one of the sisters who had refugee status in Uganda, but had chosen not to join the rest of the family, what the value of her refugee card was she gave two contradictory responses: "you can't do anything without full status" and "refugee is a name, but there's not really a point to it. People are sick and tired of it. They don't get anything from it. You go to Interaid and the camp but get nothing for it." Shortly after this she tempered her dismissiveness by stating, "There is a point to it, that you can move freely and be trusted, kind of like citizenship, but having that isn't as good as you'd expect. It doesn't give you a job." She nonetheless concluded by emphasising how it had been invaluable in allowing her dad to resettle to Australia. (Emily (Female), 9th December 2016, Rubaga Road)

This factor was considered so determinative of Eritreans' choices to move to Uganda that one OPM staff member cited it as the reason why the organisation had stopped registering Eritrean nationals at the start of 2016. Blame was cast at this population for "using this country as an exit country for other countries" and as "abusing the asylum space…so you have to halt the process." The employee further clarified; for Eritreans, "the only safe space to depart from is Uganda…they come for convenience so [OPM] had to start putting [together] some measures" to prevent this image of the country as a place to pass through from proliferating. She nonetheless reasoned that aside from the bureaucratic burden associated with their increasing numbers, arising from registering and adjudicating their claims for asylum, the presence of Eritreans in Uganda was generally accepted by the authorities. They have no political pretentions, have not aggravated social tensions in the areas where they live, and make almost no demands on the state. "Should one Eritrean be caught up in a terrorist action," however, she volunteered to me that "things would tighten up."[68] As soon as this population therefore disturbed the security that they so strongly associated with Uganda, particularly when compared to other countries in the region, the already arduous process of attaining asylum would be set to get much, much harder.

The snapshot of opinions detailed above nonetheless presents a messy defence of the institution of asylum. Those individuals not so crippled by their frustration with this regime that they simply disengaged from it detailed a few key reasons for their continued investment in this system. Chief among these were quite specific forms of protection and security that individuals felt derived from the status itself. While the traditional physical and legal protections offered by asylum were seldom mentioned, namely its defence against *refoulement* and the dangers associated with persecutory state agents, its importance for enabling particular human rights was widely noted. The right to move without harassment and intimidation from state authorities, and the right to employment, constituted the principle guarantees that imbued refugee status with enough value to ensure its continuing, widespread desirability. Beyond this, many people voiced their hopes that status would lead to some kind of 'process', a process that for some stopped at moving to one of the camps in Uganda but almost invariably constituted resettlement in Europe or North America. Probing this aspiration, however, made apparent that very few people holding out for it had any idea of how this would be achieved, by whom or when. For others, it appeared that refugee status provided a much-needed form of legal validation for the hardships and oppression that they had faced within Eritrea and that justified people's gruelling journeys out from their country. Asylum was nonetheless pursued mainly for its proximate advantages, in ameliorating some of the fears individuals experienced within Uganda, not for its future possibilities, as it enabled only one, oversubscribed pathway out of the country.

Even when considering or evaluating many of these advantages, however, one could still ask whether refugee status constitutes the best channel through which to attain them. Indeed, it was regularly associated with a range of benefits that other statuses in other contexts just as readily provide. Take two final examples. Kifilit, a man in his mid-thirties living alone in a shoemaker's workshop, felt that "if you are not here legally, everything is closed to you."[69] The corollary of this was that refugee status became critical for legalising an individual's residence in the country, accessing and holding down a job, and even formulating any kind of plan for the future. On a different occasion, I was chatting to my research assistant. They emphasised the importance of researching Eritreans' access to refugee status because "[people getting refugee status] is a very important issue for us. […] Of course, they are paying for it! They need it desperately…they want

[68] Community Services Officer, 23rd November 2016, OPM Office, Old Kampala.
[69] Kifilit (Male, mid-30s), 30th November, Nakulabye, Kampala.

to migrate, how can they migrate without a document?"[70] Here, refugee status was painted as a necessary antecedent to mobility and the legal continuation of people's journeys. While it may be true that refugee status *currently* constitutes the main means through which displaced people can access these kinds of critically important rights within Uganda, it is far from the only means through which to secure them. Contained but not conclusively answered within these examples therefore, and many of the responses detailed above, were the central quandaries of this paper to which I now return. Did people want refugee status only because it constituted the sole route through which they could achieve their objectives, namely continuing mobility and the ability to access employment? Or were there unique qualities exclusive to refugee status itself that no other options could substitute for?

6 Discussion

This paper thus set out to answer the questions of what 'values' do displaced individuals attribute to refugee status? And how do they see that its attainment will assist them in accessing protection and/or longer term solutions? One reading is that its imputed values are manifold, as evidenced by the responses of Eritreans given above. If the system could therefore only be straightened out – with corruption addressed and processes made more efficient, within both UNHCR and a scandal-ridden OPM (The Monitor, 2018) – individuals would defend asylum as the key pathway to achieving economic self-sufficiency, resettlement, mobility and some legal validation of their journey to Uganda. Another reading of the situation, however, is that very few Eritreans saw refugee status as ever equipped to offer more than the legal rights necessary to make their temporary stay in Uganda more tolerable. Those who could achieve these rights through other channels, such as through local residency cards, work permits or navigating the streets in calculated ways, often shunned the asylum system completely. Beyond the abstruseness of the RSD procedures, they objected to the assumption that asylum reduced to a 'safe space' would be enough for them, that they would be thankful and content with such a minimalist – almost defeatist – form. In other words, they rejected UNHCR's slow, seemingly unstoppable transformation from a solution- to a survival-oriented institution and the infection of its partner organisations and governments by this mentality.

Rectifying this would involve UNHCR consolidating its core functions. Processes like the Global Compact, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, however, lend even more weight to the idea of UNHCR as an expansionist 'surrogate state' (Slaughter and Crisp, 2009). In such a context, where reform would most likely constitute a scaling back in humanitarian ambition and an overhaul in outlook, it seems futile to pin great hopes on the organisation reversing a long-noted slide towards assistance, not legal or political solutions (Loescher, 2001). Furthermore, evidence from the ground in Uganda already suggests the organisation's unwillingness to engage in controversial issues of legal protection – namely whether or not refugees have the right to naturalise there – for fear of jeopardising their humanitarian programmes and access to persons of concern. It is here therefore that more creative thinking should and could kick in, thinking which importantly does not first require individuals from states such as Eritrea to hit peak frustration in the Ugandan asylum system before they can regularise their situation in exile.

[70] Samson (Male, early 40s), 21st November, Kampala.

Options already exist. Findings like these buttress calls for thinking about legal statuses that regularise people's stay in a country *in parallel* to an asylum system rather than kicking-in only once refugee status has been granted. The former option is of course harder to defend. In the latter system, an individual's vulnerability is assessed and then, if recognised as fulfilling the terms of refugee status, they are granted access to a system reserved exclusively for those who hit that threshold. It is defended on the grounds that it responds to an existential need to relocate, not an aspirational want. But in the case of Eritreans in Uganda, their unregistered residence on Ugandan soil is already tacitly tolerated because they appear to pose few risks to the country and there exists some, though not enough, recognition of the challenging conditions they face at home. In such a situation, regularisation through temporary residency or work permits would appear to suit many Eritreans and the Ugandan government better. Without the ability to work or invest, human capital is at risk of atrophying and Eritreans' savings are being run down in unproductive ways. As almost no Eritreans I spoke with wish to stay within Uganda long-term, work permits or temporary residence would likely not end up forming a back channel to naturalisation and citizenship, even if the law were to allow it. And while asylum must of course remain an option available for individuals to apply for should they need or wish, particularly those who lack the capital, influence or 'resources to avoid needing to apply for asylum in the first place' (Long and Rosengaertner, 2016: 6), there is a clear demand for another option. The option of attaining legality and rights through an alternative channel would appease those for whom a survivalist model of international protection is stifling or ill-suited.

Again, alternative models exist here, albeit extremely imperfect ones. Indeed, if we stop seeing refugee status as automatically the best choice for individuals, but rather as one option among many that works for some and not for others, then we stop seeing spaces where refugee status is not granted as intrinsically bad. With this normative lens removed, the dynamics of alternative arrangements, principally within states that are not signatories to the 1951 Convention, can be explored on the displaced individuals' own terms. This is of particular interest in spaces like the Gulf States, which play host to large numbers of individuals who would have been eligible for asylum had their journeys taken another direction (Valenta and Jakobsen, 2018). Saudi Arabia, for example, is said to have accommodated at least half a million Syrians since the conflict there began (Bloomberg, 2015), and several hundreds of thousands of Yemenis, and lays a historical claim to have loosened immigration requirements for Eritreans fleeing Ethiopian suppression during their long war for independence (Thiollet, 2011). While labour standards in the Gulf remain easily condemnable (Amnesty International, 2017), the fact that amidst populations fleeing conflict-affected countries exist groups who have made active and informed choices to travel there suggests the existence of protective strategies with which we could engage as researchers. For now, by primarily identifying and locating 'protection' based on the numbers of individuals awarded particular, institutionalised statuses – refugees, IDPS and other persons of concern – we reify a framework that renders a whole set of other institutions and pathways such as these invisible (Polzer, 2008). Perhaps they can focus our attention outside the box of current thinking, even while exhibiting their own numerous imperfections.

In line with the many authors detailed above, who note individual and group strategies for circumventing the asylum system altogether, this article thus documents how and why this dynamic played out within the relatively small population of displaced Eritreans in Kampala. What this exposes is that refugee status there provided individuals with an inefficient and frustrating way of accessing a limited set of rights and opportunities, leading those with more capacity and knowledge to seek them elsewhere. In the main, therefore, this paper argues for looking beyond reform of the global system of asylum to seek answers outside of these institutions and mandates for how to assist

populations like the Eritreans in Uganda. UNHCR's growth represents both an expansion in new directions but also an inability to effectively discharge its existing mandate. The latter fact is not incidental; it is systemic. As refugee status becomes an ever-emaciated version of its founding form, as highlighted by the perspectives of individuals shared above, the importance of exploring and investing in alternatives is critical.

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