

The Forgotten Urban Refugees: A Review of the Demographic and Socio-Economic Dimension of Refugees in Nairobi City

Abstract

Traditionally refugees fleeing from war or political persecution have been concentrated in camps, which are mainly situated in rural areas. Their migration patterns have, therefore, always been rural to rural or urban to rural. Increasingly, however, a substantial proportion of refugees are moving into urban areas. Could such increasing migration of refugees into urban areas as opposed to settling in designated camps where most of the services and organizations providing assistance are located be due to the poor services or in search of economic opportunities economic migrants as they are referred to in the developed world or both? Do such refugees differ from those that remain in the designated camps? We use the UNHCR data base supplemented by primary data collection to explore these issues.

Extended Abstract

Traditionally refugees fleeing from war or political prosecution have been concentrated in camps, which are mainly situated in rural areas. Their migration patterns therefore have always been rural to rural or urban to rural. Increasingly however, a substantial proportion of refugees is moving into urban areas, in at least two ways; those in camps on transit to re-settlements in other countries “disappear” within the urban areas when their claims are rejected, and other simply disappear from the camps into the urban areas. The Nairobi city is one such destination for refugees from the great lakes region and the horn of Africa.

Although a number of studies that have explored the migration patterns of refugees, few have explored the incentives behind such migration patterns. Could such increasing migration of refugees into urban areas as opposed to settling in designated camps where most of the services and organizations providing assistance to refugees are located be due to the poor services or in search of economic opportunities – economic migrants as they are referred to in the developed world or both? Do such refugees differ from those that remain in the designated camps?

To answer these questions, this paper will use a combination of data sources; the UNHCR database will provide socio-economic characteristics and other individual variables, in addition to individual case studies. Interviews will be conducted with key persons involved in programs dealing with refugees, key government ministries, and the refugees themselves to uncover the motives for “defection”. The paper will also review literature on refugee situation in Africa with a special focus on urban refugees.

Preliminary research findings suggest that the refugees in urban areas are mostly recent arrivals who are predominately young, well educated, unmarried, and better skilled than their counterparts in the camps – pointing to the possibility of economic migrants.

Background

Low income countries contribute over 80 percent of the global refugee population. Whereas the period 1997 – 2001 was characterized by a 24 percent decline in the global refugee population

compared to the previous five years, the share of refugee from Africa rose from 20 to 45 percent during the same period. The number of refugees returning to their country of origin has been on the decline. An estimated 50 percent of the refugee population is living in camps while the other half are either living in urban areas or their area of settlement is unknown. The demographic profile of refugees differs significantly across regions, within countries and it also depends on the refugee situation they are in.

By end of 2001, Kenya was home to over a quarter of a million refugees. About 50% of the refugees in Kenya are aged above 18 years while about 45% of the total population are female. According to UNHCR statistics there are about 15,000 refugees live in Nairobi while an estimate from Amnesty International places the figure at 40,000. This official figure does not include the proportion that is living in the city illegally since the Kenya government and UNHCR does not allow refugees to settle outside the designated camps that are located far from the city. Refugees including those in urban areas pose a challenge to both the host government, the indigenous populations and to the refugees themselves. The host country can perceive them as posing an unprecedented threat to their sovereignty, security and global stability.

Although the contribution of such influx of refugees to the increasing population of Nairobi is unknown, the shift in migratory patterns is likely to increase the Nairobi population pressure.

Data and Methodology

This paper will use data from the UNHCR database to document the level of urban refugees living in Nairobi, the trend over the years, as well as their socio-demographic and economic profiles. Case studies from the UNHCR database will also be reviewed to understand some of the challenges and aspirations of the refugees living in Nairobi city. In addition, interviews will be conducted with some key persons involved in programs dealing with refugees, key government ministries and staff of UNHCR agency. The paper will also review literature on refugee situation in Africa with a special focus on urban refugees.