

**Chapter 1**  
**“Becoming More Ugandan”**  
**Social Navigation Strategies among Self-Settled Refugees**  
**in Adjumani Town**

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**Introduction**

Refugees' agency has been the object of several studies questioning the image of refugees as passive victims and vulnerable people. Self-settled refugees, particularly, have been addressed by a wealth of studies focused on major cities of refugee hosting countries such as Johannesburg (Landau, 2006), Cairo (Grabska, 2006; Mahmoud, 2011), Khartoum (Kibreab, 1996), Nairobi (Campbell, 2006) and Kampala (Dryden-Peterson, 2006; Lyytinen, 2015; Pottier, 2015). In fact, however, little attention has been placed on smaller urban centres of refugee-hosting countries, which are the most rapidly growing in the Global South (UNDESA, 2010) and are also the most likely to host large numbers of self-settled refugees due to the proximity of many of these centres to international borders or to refugee camps. Refugees who decide to settle in these towns usually remain scarcely visible to host governments and aid agencies, and their coping strategies are largely ignored.

This chapter seeks to contribute filling this gap through an analysis of the agency of self-settled refugees in Adjumani town, a small urban centre situated in the north-western part of the country. While having hosted Sudanese refugees since the 1960s, Adjumani District has been the theatre of an unprecedented inflow of South Sudanese refugees since 2014, many of which are thought to have left the refugee settlements after having registered and obtained a refugee ID card.<sup>1</sup> The chapter shows that self-settled refugees are very aware of the structural constraints that limit their possible actions, and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with UNHCR senior staff, Kampala, 1 December 2017.

express their agency through the deliberate adoption of individual strategies of social navigation, at least partly based on their capacity of building good relations with local authorities, Ugandan partners, neighbours and friends. The refugee category is never part of their identity and constitutes a liability rather than an asset for those trying to make a living in the town.

While the kind of agency that self-settled refugees are able to exercise may not be considered as transformative, it asks questions as to whether informal local relationships and arrangements that refugees craft can provide protection to urban self-settled refugees irrespective of legal and formal ones, and the extent to which they differ from those crafted by other vulnerable urban dwellers (Landau, 2014).

The chapter provides a brief discussion of the literature on refugee's identity and agency with a focus on Vigh's concept of social navigation (Vigh, 2006; 2009), and on the concept of self-settled refugees. It then presents the situation of self-settled refugees in Uganda with a focus on Adjumani town and discusses findings on their strategies of social navigation through the adoption of other forms of identity than the refugee one. It concludes by reflecting on the implications of these findings on the understanding of refugees' agency and on the importance of empirical evidence on local practices that go beyond legal definitions and arrangements in the design of effective protection policies.

The chapter draws on fieldwork conducted in Kampala, Gulu and Adjumani District between the end of 2017 and early 2018. During this time, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including representatives of the local government structures (village, municipal and district level particularly), and international and local staff of NGOs involved in the refugee response in Adjumani District. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with self-settled refugees residing in four villages within Adjumani municipality. These villages were selected based on information about the distribution of refugee residents provided by the Adjumani Town Mayor and backed by local chairmen of Local Council 1 (LC1). Initial respondents were approached based on their reputation for being "active members" of the local community – not the refugee community, but their community of residence. In one instance, an individual interview was turned into a focus group discussion as one of these informants had invited all the refugee women residing in the village to attend our meeting. However, aware of the possible bias that this sampling might entail, my research assistant – who himself had refugee origins – and I expanded our sampling through randomly approaching people selling items at local markets (particularly Awindiri Market, Adjumani's major food market) and at local service

facilities such as health clinics. Ten refugees and ten Ugandan citizens were thus selected in this way, with various backgrounds in terms of experiences of exile, place of origin in South Sudan and available resources, particularly financial. Even though it is not my intent to claim that the findings of this chapter are representative of the entire self-settled refugee population, the stories collected do suggest some common strategies among the people interviewed and provide some food for thought to draw some general conclusions.

### **Refugees' agency and identity**

In the last two decades, a wealth of scholarly literature has shown that refugees play an active role in making decisions over their livelihood strategies (Jacobsen, 2002; Kibreab, 2004), the place where they live (Hovil, 2007) or in the emergence of new forms of identification and sense of belonging (Hovil, 2016; Malkki, 1995). These authors have studied refugees as agents of resistance, even though, as other categories defined by a legal status, they act in a liminal space characterised by strong external constraints. Their capacity of creatively engaging with these constraints has been variously addressed by this literature and gives us an idea of what the contours are of refugees' agency (de Vries, 2016).

Refugees' agency expresses itself also in the making and unmaking of identity. The latter has been addressed by several authors that have emphasised the situational and socially constructed character of identities in refugee communities (de Simone, 2020; Hatoss, 2012; Mahmoud, 2011; Malkki, 1995). Malkki, for example, has shown how different refugee communities may adopt or refuse the refugee category based on their place of residence with very little relation to their legal situation (Malkki, 1995). In some cases, the fact of being a refugee is a foundational identity element used to create a moral community, in other cases it is something that should be concealed or denied in order to become part of a community. This is the case of refugees or migrants who try to explore avenues of integration in the local host society, as it happens for self-settled refugees. In their interactions with local authorities and societies, these people craft some sort of informal social contract sanctioned by their actual behaviour and its acceptance and recognition by local authorities. Lund (2016) speaks of "illegal citizens" showing multiple examples of their relations with the state:

[E]stablished presence may enable people to acquire identity cards (or proxies such as voting cards, or membership cards of political or cultural

associations); paying for utilities provides customers with receipts documenting and legitimising residence; and people's possession of land — along with the fact that government institutions ignore or tolerate a land market — allows for the gradual build-up of expectations of recognition. Likewise, by forming health committees, market guilds, or parent–teacher associations before there is a clinic, a marketplace or a school, citizens enter the orbit of certain governing institutions and conjure up the exercise of authority and recognition by anticipating the “contract”. In order to establish a “contract” of mutual recognition, the inhabitants may be able to act and organise as they anticipate the municipality would expect proper citizens to act (Lund, 2016, pp. 1208–1209).

Claims to refugee identity or practices of invisibility can give access to certain bundles of rights, challenging the state's regulatory role and the very existence of differentiated bundles of rights attributed to different categories of people (Hovil, 2016). The refugee category can thus attribute a specific identity to people but can also be side-lined in favour of other categories or of other forms of identification. The choice of these categories constitutes a form of agency: people can “move ‘out of place’ and act in a manner that is seemingly outside their limited interests and identities. Just because people are workers, it does not mean that they will claim higher wages through a union. Just because people are poor, it does not mean that they have to be led by others who know what is best for them” (Neocosmos, 2014, p. 147). Just because they have a legal status of refugees, it does not mean that they will use this category to identify themselves and abide by the social and legal norms that define their condition (de Simone, 2020).

Acknowledging the existence of refugees' agency does not mean neglecting the existence of structural constraints to their actions and choices. People are never completely free to make decisions and act as they want. Vigh (2006, 2009) speaks of social navigation to depict the relational and dynamic character of agency. Social navigation refers to the willing action of people living in a constantly changing and unstable environment, emphasising their engagement to reach positions that they perceive to be better than those where they currently find themselves (Vigh, 2009). It implies an assessment of the present social environment as well as an anticipation of the consequences of their decisions and actions in the future, and it acknowledges the existence of social forces that pose structural constraints on agents, even though these constraints may be unstable and constantly changing. Social navigation thus allows us to illuminate multiple forms of agency, including those not directly trying to change “the boundaries of ‘what can be done’”

(Beswick, Hammerstad, 2013, p. 481), but rather to ensure some form of survival or improvement in people's living conditions. In many instances, the exercise of agency enables refugees to "navigate" the spaces of others to their "advantage" (Vigh, 2009): in picking up one form of identity or the other, refugees' agency is often about survival and coping, as is the pursuit of invisibility by certain actors in certain situations (Bøås, 2013; Thomson, 2013). Even though this agency does not ultimately change the structural condition of refugees, it contributes to securing a space for action that makes refugees' lives more secure and predictable and helps them navigating their experience of exile.

### **Self-settled refugees in an uncertain environment**

Even though refugees have sometimes been described through the victimising terms of "speechless emissaries" (Malkki, 1996) or "helpless victims" (Branch, 2011), self-settled refugees distance themselves from these images as they willingly decide to opt out of the refugee protection system and settle somewhere else from where they are supposed to stay.

Self-settled refugees have always existed and are the norm in countries of the Global North; however, they represent a puzzling phenomenon for countries of the Global South that are receiving large influxes of refugees from neighbouring countries and that apply sometimes very strict encampment policies. Until not very long ago, they were considered as a challenge even by the UNHCR: while vaguely recognising that the protection mandate of the organisation should extend to all people in a refugee-like situation, the UNHCR refugee policy adopted in 1997 discouraged self-settlement in urban areas and considered it a management problem for both the host government and the humanitarian industry (UNHCR, 1997). This policy was widely criticised since its adoption by a growing consensus in academic literature on the preferability of self-settlement to encampment (Bakewell, 2014; Dryden-Peterson, 2006); nevertheless, a new policy considering "urban areas to be a legitimate place for refugees to enjoy their rights" was only approved in 2009 (UNHCR, 2009a).

This policy acknowledges that over half of the global refugee population currently lives in cities (UNHCR, 2009b) and that these urban self-settled refugees are entitled to protection and assistance by the UN system and host governments. Yet self-settlement in the Global South is generally resisted for various reasons. First, refugees are considered a potential security threat both for the local population, because of their condition of extreme deprivation,

and in terms of national security, due to their possible engagement in fighting in their home country or risks of conflict spill-over. Second, governments usually fear that the increase in demographic pressure in areas which are often already under-serviced and marginal would cause negative reactions from the local population, and competition for scarce local resources. Finally, while the UNHCR encourages the provision of assistance also to self-settled and urban refugees, the delivery of humanitarian aid is much easier if refugees live in camps where they can be easily identified and reached (Bakewell, 2014).

For these reasons, refugees in countries of the Global South often self-settle, breaching the law and finding themselves facing a number of extra challenges, including that of their illegal status. Nevertheless, several studies have demonstrated that if people have any choice, they will usually opt to leave the camps and to move to urban areas, in search of better services, livelihoods, opportunities of repatriation or integration in the host country. In 2001, an assessment conducted by Lucy Hovil (2001) among Sudanese refugees in Arua District demonstrated that self-settled refugees enjoyed better human security than those within settlements for several reasons, including less exposure to physical threats and better access to services, markets and business opportunities. Another study conducted a few years later by the Refugee Law Project (2005) focused on people's perceptions of their quality of life and showed how people were thought to live better lives outside the settlements even though they received no – or very little – humanitarian assistance. These perceptions were confirmed by a more recent study by the International Refugee Rights Initiative, which showed that refugees living outside the settlements described their situation in more favourable terms than those living in the settlements and were more able to pursue independent livelihoods and become self-sufficient in spite of food shortages in the market (International Refugee Rights Initiative, 2015). Even though this analysis might be biased by the fact that people who chose to self-settle are usually the better-off, who have some resources to invest in housing, food, and possibly capital investment, “cities ... offer at least faint promises of upward economic mobility and physical freedom” (Landau, 2014, p. 139) and thus remain attractive for whomever can afford to move.

### **Self-settlement in Uganda**

Uganda has often been praised for the openness of its refugee policy (BBC Africa, 2016; Titz, Feck, 2017). In its legislation, the *Refugee Act* and *Refu-*

*gees Regulations* (Government of Uganda, 2006; 2010), it recognises the right of refugees to move freely on the national territory and the right to work and access basic services on an equal basis with Ugandan citizens. Even though refugees enjoy freedom of movement, they are encouraged to stay in refugee settlements: this is where humanitarian assistance is provided, free services such as schooling and healthcare are made available, and where refugees are given a free plot of land for housing and farming. Yet, an unknown – but likely considerable – number of people leave and move to Kampala or smaller towns in the proximity of the refugee settlements.

Uganda has no specific policy on urban refugees, therefore these people remain in a sort of limbo: they are neither registered as urban dwellers nor illegal migrants, as the majority registers as refugee in one of the refugee settlements before moving to town. Besides the 86 000 people registered in Kampala as urban refugees, there are no official figures of how many refugees reside in Ugandan urban areas. While there are efforts to try to map the refugee population in smaller towns such as Adjumani and Arua,<sup>2</sup> the high mobility of refugees makes it difficult to obtain a reliable picture. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the numbers of urban refugees, especially in urban centres nearby the refugee settlements, are high. During a quick visit to Arua and Rhino Camp in 2018, for example, I witnessed a constant flow of minibuses and private vehicles taking town-based refugees back to the camp for refugee re-registration.<sup>3</sup> As I also wanted to travel to Rhino Camp with public transport but was worried about the security of travelling on a bumpy road for one and a half hours in a car with five seats packed with ten people, I tried to convince the driver of a collective taxi to accept my payment for three seats instead of only one to have the car less packed. He refused and explained: "My dear, I cannot accept. These are registration days. We must carry all the refugees to the camp. We cannot allow cars to move half empty. We are giving a public service, you see, otherwise they will lose their [food ration] card".<sup>4</sup> And indeed, four to five really packed vehicles left every hour, every day, taking refugees back to Rhino Camp refugee settlement to

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with LC1 Chairman of Paridi village, Adjumani town, 2 May 2018; Interview with Deputy Refugee Desk Officer, Arua Town, 23 May 2018.

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, UNHCR and the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the Ugandan government body in charge of refugee management undertook a massive re-registration of the refugees in Uganda following allegations of officials inflating refugee figures, which resulted in a scandal that involved both government officials and UNHCR Uganda representatives. (See *The Monitor*, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Personal conversation with taxi driver, Arua Town, 23 May 2018.

re-register as refugees. Similar perceptions of high numbers of town-based refugees have been confirmed by recent studies on self-settled refugees in small Ugandan towns (Dawa, 2020; VNG International, 2018).

Differently from Kampala, where limited assistance is available in the form of protection (UNHCR, 2018) and, in the second half of 2020, of initiatives contrasting the socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 lockdown (Khan, 2020), refugees residing in all the other urban centres receive no or very limited assistance (VNG International, 2018).

Adjumani town is a small urban centre hosting the headquarter of Adjumani District. The district itself was created in 1997, during another period of massive refugee inflow from the then Sudan. According to the National Census conducted in 2014, the Town Council has a population of 42 000, but this number does not account for the new refugee arrivals since 2014. No data on urban refugees residing in the town are available except for those provided by the Adjumani District five-year Development Plan 2015/2016–2019/2020<sup>5</sup> that speaks of 2 054 town-based refugees. However, this number referred to a total refugee population in Adjumani District of 88 000, whereas by November 2020 this number had reached over 215 000.<sup>6</sup>

Consistently with the literature on urban self-settled refugees, life in Adjumani town is more difficult for refugees than in the settlements. In town, their status becomes legally vulnerable: even if refugees enjoy freedom of movement, their presence can potentially be questioned at any time for various reasons (national security, public health, etc.) that leave a relatively high degree of arbitrary power in the hands of Ugandan authorities, as expressed in the *Refugee Act* (Government of Uganda, 2006). Secondly, life in town is more expensive: like Ugandan citizens, the refugees need to pay for basic services such as schools and health centres, for taxes and for rents. Moreover, because they are thought to receive assistance by humanitarian organisations, they are sometimes charged higher prices than the locals for the same services (Stark et al., 2015). Thirdly, the environment in town is generally less friendly than in the settlements, and refugees are often stigmatised and discriminated against on the basis of popular stereotypes (Dawa, 2020). The Dinka, for example, are often described as lazy and “wild”,<sup>7</sup> and can often

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<sup>5</sup> Available at <http://npa.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ADJUMANI-DISTRICT-DDPII-2015-2016-to-2019-2020.pdf> (15/12/2021).

<sup>6</sup> See the Ugandan Refugee Response Portal at: <https://ugandarefugees.org/en/country/uga> (11/12/2020).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with LC1 Secretary Karoko village, Adjumani town, 21 May 2018; LC1 Chairman of Patua village, Adjumani town, 14 May 2018.

have a hard time in finding accommodation to rent, as landlords would say that they "destroy [their] houses".<sup>8</sup> Even the Madi, who share language and customs with the local Ugandan population, are sometimes discriminated against. Several Madi refugee women reported being insulted and called *kevokevo* by Ugandan urban dwellers during a focus group discussion, explaining that *kevokevo* is the Madi expression for someone who comes and goes and who is incapable of taking care of their things.<sup>9</sup>

While the benefits brought by refugee presence in terms of service availability and market expansion are more visible near the settlements, in town the host community rather lamented an increase in the price of housing and other items, as well as growing market competition particularly in low-capital businesses such as trade in second-hand clothes or in beans and maize – refugees' food rations, some of which are routinely sold on the local market as a cash-earning strategy for them. These negative perceptions contribute to explaining urban dwellers' relatively poor opinion of the refugees, and particularly of self-settled ones, as they are seen as competitors for the same scarce resources.

Notwithstanding the various forms of discrimination – which range from the imposition of higher fees to access the same services to limited inclusion in the formal job and house rental markets<sup>10</sup> – refugees choose to move out of the settlements for several reasons. Women often cited access to better and less crowded schools for their children, together with access to health care for themselves or close relatives.<sup>11</sup> Male interviewees focused rather on the availability of jobs and business opportunities.<sup>12</sup> Working in town, however, did not necessarily entail leaving the refugee settlement: commuting between the town and the nearest settlements was common and allowed ref-

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with LC1 Secretary Karoko village, Adjumani town, 21 May 2018. The Dinka also bear the brunt of being often considered the cause of the civil war in South Sudan due to the fact that the President Salva Kiir is a Dinka and that the war has been largely framed in ethnic terms and are therefore also discriminated against by other South Sudanese communities.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with female self-settled refugees, Adjumani town, 2 May 2018; focus group discussion of female self-settled refugees, Adjumani town, 2 May 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with male self-settled refugee, Adjumani town, 4 May 2018; LC1 Secretary Karoko village, Adjumani town, 21 May 2018; female self-settled refugee, Adjumani town, 21 May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with three female self-settled refugee, Adjumani town, 30 April 2018; 1 May 2018; 2 May 2018; focus group discussion of female self-settled refugees, Adjumani town, 2 May 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with two male self-settled refugees, Adjumani town, 5 May 2018.

ugees to save money as they did not need to rent a house. Security was also a major concern among refugees residing in town. In informal conversations I had in Adjumani and Kampala, frequent allegations were made by several of my informants about a “black car” of the South Sudanese security forces raiding the settlements at night in search for political opponents and causing disappearances.<sup>13</sup> People concerned about being wanted by the South Sudanese security preferred the anonymity of the town to the promiscuity of the settlements where everybody knew each other and the risk of being identified was therefore higher.

### **Strategies of social navigation in Adjumani town**

As these accounts have shown, refugees typically decide to leave the settlements to address individual problems and situations, sometimes deriving from their condition of refugee. Once in town, they barely ever mobilise their refugee identity and rather try to conceal it, adopting individual strategies to navigate their challenges and to legitimise their presence as urban dwellers (de Simone, 2020).

Whilst various types of refugee associations and local authorities exist in refugee settlements, refugees in Adjumani town seemed to refer directly to the LC1 chairperson of the village where they resided for any problem of everyday life, from theft to the breakdown of boreholes.<sup>14</sup> This relation was an individual one, sometimes trespassing towards friendship, and often becoming a vital support to cope with everyday problems (Simone, 2004).<sup>15</sup> All refugees actively participated, through various forms of support including financial, to local social events such as weddings and funerals; however, thanks to this close relationship with LC1, some were asked to become more involved in community life. People that could count on these relationships and were asked to take on some form of community leadership were more often refugees that had been living in the area since the 1990s or earlier. One example was that of a 40-year-woman from the South Sudanese Madi com-

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<sup>13</sup> All of them have asked not to be mentioned in the research and to avoid giving any information that could lead to their identification.

<sup>14</sup> Focus group discussion of female self-settled refugees, Adjumani town, 2 May 2018.

<sup>15</sup> This was confirmed also by respondents who experienced actual barriers in their relations with the locals, such as an elderly lady who did neither speak the local language nor English, who said that in case of any problem she would relate to her neighbour – who spoke both her native language Kuku and Madi – to address the LC1. Interview with female self-settled refugee, Paridi village, Adjumani town, 5 May 2018.

munity that had been living in Adjumani since the 1990s: she became a member of the local Village Health Committee in charge of monitoring the hygiene situation of the village and of making sure that all residents, including disabled persons, had adequate access to health care upon request of the LC1 chairperson. As she was Madi and knew the area quite well for having resided there for years, he thought that she would provide an effective link with the growing non-Madi speaking self-settled refugee community in the area. In other cases, the close relationship with the LC1 chairperson went as far as allowing refugee participation in LC1 (informal) elections,<sup>16</sup> and to acquire a Ugandan ID card through the recommendation of the LC1 of their village of residence.<sup>17</sup>

Social bonds with local authorities or other local entrepreneurs were also important to start an economic activity, which was one of the major reasons for many refugees to move to town. Job opportunities as employees in Adjumani were not many – the government and international aid agencies being the main employers but not keen on hiring non-Ugandan nationals. While citizenship was a requisite to work in public offices, international agencies and private companies usually avoided employing refugees for fear of retaliation from the local community,<sup>18</sup> which routinely accused aid agencies of importing manpower from other parts of the country.<sup>19</sup> Starting up a small business was therefore the most common way through which refugees tried to earn an income; to do so, either they partnered with local entrepreneurs or they relied on relations with local authorities.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with LC1 Chairman of Paridi village, Adjumani town, 1 May 2018; LC1 Chairman of Minia East village, Adjumani town, 21 May 2018; LC1 Chairman of Patua village, Adjumani town, 14 May 2018. LC1 elections were officially held in 2018 for the first time since 2001. In between, informal elections were periodically organised locally, sometimes just to legitimise the incumbent office holder.

<sup>17</sup> Until the creation of the National Identification and Registration Authority in 2015, holding an ID card released by the LC1 enabled access to services and rights reserved for Ugandan citizens, as there was very limited cross-checking of different databases. It was enough, for example, to be registered for voting in national elections, because the Electoral Commission and the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration would not cross-check the information about people holding such locally issued ID cards as no national registry of released ID cards existed. Informal conversation with Ugandan journalist, Adjumani town, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with male self-settled refugee, Adjumani town, 4 May 2018; Informal conversation with international NGO representative in Adjumani town.

<sup>19</sup> Informal conversation with aid workers in Adjumani town and Gulu.

Susan, a young South Sudanese woman living in Adjumani town adopted the first strategy. In 2016 a local church group gave her some cassava as a gift. She brewed the local beer from the cassava and sold it from her house, and then reinvested her income to buy more cassava. As her brewery business grew, she decided she wanted to expand it and move to the market instead of selling from her house. She partnered with her Ugandan friend Anita, whom she met at the church group, and started buying vegetables from a wholesaler once a week. They moved to Awindiri Market, Adjumani town food market, where they regularly pay market dues but have a higher visibility and earn enough to share the income and support their children. Both claim to have equal rights of working as vendors at the market, yet Susan usually stays a step back from Anita: it is the latter who interacts with local authorities, suppliers and strangers in general – indeed, she was also the one who first agreed to talk to me and my research assistant.<sup>20</sup>

Friendship relations remain vital to enable the start-up of individual business activities. Paul started a carpentry shop in Adjumani Town centre. It was not the first time that he was displaced to Adjumani: in the 1990s, as a youth, he went to school there and his connections endured up to the present day. Two of his friends became LC1 chairmen of villages within Adjumani Town Council. When he was displaced again in 2014, he went back to Adjumani town, rented a house in the village of one of his LC1 friends and started the workshop in the village of his other LC1 friend. The mediation of the latter LC1 helped him to resolve a dispute with his workshop landlord and to expand his business, which employed 12 people – including seven Ugandan nationals. Even though he complained about discrimination against refugee entrepreneurs by international NGOs and government agencies, his business was flourishing and well-integrated in the local economic fabric in spite of his refugee status.<sup>21</sup>

Self-settled refugee women typically undertake smaller informal businesses such as the production of beer, pancakes or beaded jewellery which are then sold informally from their houses without paying taxes or market dues. They consider their participation to Village Savings and Loans Associations, commonly known as *assusu* in the Madi language, as a good strategy to legitimate this kind of business. *Assusu* have been initiated by develop-

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with two female vendors (one self-settled refugee and one Ugandan national) at Awindiri Market, Adjumani town, 9 May 2018. Bjørkhaug, Bøås, and Kebede (2017) report a similar dynamic with Ivorian refugees in Liberia.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with male self-settled refugee, Adjumani town, 4 May 2018.

ment projects in the late 1990s and are currently a common form of women's grassroots organisation, enabling their members to borrow small sums of money for extraordinary family expenses such as burials, school examination fees, etc., or for starting or expanding business activities. Being a member of *assusu* increased women's perception of security and acceptance by the local community. Nine out of 17 self-settled refugee women participating to a focus group discussion in Adjumani Town reported being part of *assusu* to carry out their small businesses without being questioned by Ugandan authorities. One of them explained: "People know we do that, it is fine with the local government because they know that we are members of *assusu*, they know who we are and where we live so we cannot do anything bad".<sup>22</sup>

These examples speak to the strategies of social navigation that self-settled refugees adopt to overcome their daily challenges and to ultimately improve their everyday perception of security. As one of my female interviewees put it, they aim at "becoming more Ugandan", leaving aside their refugee identity – which in the town often becomes a liability rather than an asset – and relying on other more individual identities: that of resident, of businessman, of member of *assusu*. They do so in a deliberate way, conscious of the consequences that this has for their capacity of being recognised rights or entitlements – in other words, on their capacity of producing scenarios that are more favourable to them, navigating through structural constraints (Vigh, 2009).

While these structural constraints are not changed or removed by refugees' actions, they are mitigated through a number of locally crafted informal arrangements that are deemed to be more effective than legal or formal ones. All refugees interviewed in Adjumani town, for example, showed that the legitimacy of their residence in town derived much more from their capacity to establish good individual relationships with Ugandan neighbours and local authorities than by any legal document. Even in renting a house or a plot of land, the LC1 witnessing an informal lease agreement was considered more effective in terms of tenure security than a formal agreement that could be brought to court, where refugees believed that they would be discriminated against in the resolution of cases.<sup>23</sup>

The process of "becoming more Ugandan" is a slow one, and one that is accessible to people to different degrees, based on their personal resources, skills, and capacity for building the necessary relations. Nevertheless, most of

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<sup>22</sup> Focus group discussion of 17 female self-settled refugees, Adjumani town, 2 May 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with male self-settled refugee, Adjumani town, 4 May 2018.

the people interviewed considered it as a valid strategy to improve their life conditions, even to the detriment of legalising their position at the national level.

## Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the expression of agency of self-settled refugees in Adjumani Town, analysing particularly the strategies of social navigation based on cultivation of relationships with Ugandan local authorities, neighbours and friends and on the adoption of various forms of identity that distance themselves from the status of refugee. It has shown that, despite moving in a context characterised by strong structural constraints, self-settled refugees are capable of improving the conditions they face in their everyday life through a number of informal arrangements that help them to navigate their experience of exile. These entail investing in their local social networks but also distancing themselves from the collective identity of refugees, preferring more individual forms of identification that emphasise their belonging to other diverse communities shared with their Ugandan counterparts. It is worth remembering that opting out the formal refugee assistance structure itself requires some sort of background capital, including financial resources and meaningful social relations – including family ones. Although it is not my aim to claim that social relations with the locals is the only variable at play in the successful strategies deployed by self-settled refugees in Adjumani town, evidence suggests that it can be an important one.

Even though the agency expressed by refugees through these strategies of social navigation is not a transformative one, as it does not ultimately change the specific situation of legal vulnerability that self-settled refugees face, it encourages us to assess more carefully the importance of informal local arrangements in the lives of urban self-settled refugees. These might well be more effective in solving people's everyday problems than the more formalised and legal solutions often advocated by international organisations working with refugees. The observation of these practices suggests that the everyday problems facing self-settled refugees might not be very different from those facing any other urban vulnerable social group (Landau, 2014). This idea is confirmed by the effort of self-settled refugees presented in the findings of this chapter to distance themselves from the refugee community and to rather affirm their participation in some other kind of locally rooted community, of business people, of residents, or *assusu* members. The acknowledgement of these practices as a form of self-settled refugees' agency is therefore extremely important as a basis to inform effective policy-making,

in order to avoid, as Landau warns, the counterproductive outcome of making urban refugee communities excessively visible, especially when they are finding other more discreet yet effective ways of navigating their experience of exile (Landau, 2014).

## References

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