

Refugees and centralized state-building in Uganda

Author: Sara de Simone, Scuola di Studi Internazionali, Università degli Studi di Trento.

Abstract

Uganda is the third country in the world for absolute numbers of refugees hosted. Why is this the case? Is it just because of its geographical position and humanitarianism, or does it gain benefits from its open policy? This article contributes to the literature addressing these questions by shedding light on how a refugee emergency can be used for state-building purposes. Thanks to its long history of being a donor darling, Uganda has been able to position itself also as a model for refugee-hosting, receiving significant amounts of international aid, which were employed to sustain the country's extraversion strategies. Even though the state-building project nurtured by these extraverted resources is not of a liberal type, and is marred by corruption and scandal, it cannot be dismissed as individual rent-seeking. Rather, the paper shows that this state-building project aims to recentralization and the strengthening of the incumbent regime through the strengthening of the central state structure in the refugee-hosting peripheries to the detriment of the local governments.

Keywords: Refugees, State-building, Extraversion, International Aid, Uganda.

Introduction

According to UNHCR, Uganda is the third refugee-hosting country globally. Although it has a history of hosting refugees that dates back to the early years of independence, in recent years its refugee policy has often been cited as one of the best in the world¹. Since 2014, the country opened its borders to an unprecedented number of refugees fleeing from large scale violence in South Sudan. Uganda currently hosts about 1.5 million refugees² and its government has put effort in keeping the borders open even when the demographic pressure in refugee-hosting areas started threatening local societal peace³. Why is this the case? Why is Uganda so keen on hosting so many refugees? What benefits it gains from its open refugee policy, and how?

It is often assumed that countries willing to take on a heavy refugee burden do so based on humanitarianism: a World Bank report published in 2016, for example, attributes Uganda's open attitude mostly to the past experiences of exile of many Ugandans (including people in government positions) and cross-border ethnic affiliation with refugees hosted in the country⁴. Academic work has addressed the question of why states would accept to host large numbers of refugees more critically, looking at the benefits that can accrue to the host country's economy and society from the presence of refugees⁵, or at the political gains deriving from hosting

¹ "Uganda: 'One of the best places to be a refugee'", *BBC Africa*, 13 May 2016; C. Titz, M. Feck, "Uganda is the most refugee-friendly country in the world", *Spiegel Online*, 13 September 2017; "Uganda Welcomes Refugees with 'Progressive Policies'", *Voice of America*, 13 April 2017.

² Data from the Uganda Refugee Response Portal, <https://ugandarefugees.org/en/country/uga>, (accessed 9 December 2021).

³ "Make Uganda safe haven for refugees", *Daily Monitor*, 11 January 2017; M. Katasi, "The soaring refugee crisis should not change who Ugandans are", *Daily Monitor*, 20 June 2017. See also Museveni's speech at the Leaders' Summit on Refugees in New York on 20 September 2016, available at <https://www.statehouse.go.ug/media/presidential-statements/2016/09/20/statement-he-yoweri-kaguta-museveni-leaders-summit-refugees> (accessed 7 June 2020) and Moses Ali's declaration about Uganda needing to maintain its "open door policy" for refugees on 21 June 2019, available at <https://opm.go.ug/2019/06/21/uganda-to-maintain-her-open-door-policy-for-refugees-gen-moses-ali/> (accessed 31 July 2020).

⁴ World Bank. "An Assessment of Uganda's Progressive Approach to Refugee Management", World Bank, 2016, p.17.

⁵ K. Jacobsen, "Can refugees benefit the state? Refugee resources and African statebuilding". *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40, 4, 577–96; J. Milner, *Refugees, the state and the politics of asylum in Africa*. Basingstoke; New York; Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; S. Dryden-Peterson, L. Hovil, "A Remaining Hope for Durable Solutions: Local Integration of Refugees and Their Hosts in the Case of Uganda", *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 22, 1; L. Tatah, T. Darge Delbiso, J. M. Rodriguez-Llanes, J. Gil Cuesta, D. Guha-Sapir, "Impact of Refugees on Local Health Systems: A Difference-in-Differences Analysis in Cameroon". *PLoS ONE*

refugees from some countries rather than some others⁶. Even though in 2002 Karen Jacobsen argued for the importance of unveiling the state-building potential of refugees in terms of the development opportunities embedded in their presence and in the international attention that refugee emergencies bring⁷, little attention has been paid to the impact of refugee-hosting at state level and on regimes in Africa, and on what might be the interests and agendas of governments in hosting refugees, beyond mere humanitarianism and foreign policy considerations.

Building on critical work on state-building in Africa, this article analyses the case of Uganda as a refugee hosting country and argues that Museveni's government has used refugee-hosting as a resource for state-building, to promote a positive narrative of Uganda as a welcoming peaceful haven in a troubled region while strengthening central control over the country's peripheries, ultimately serving the purpose of regime consolidation. In the first section, the article traces a link between literature on state-building in Africa and the practice of hosting refugees as a strategy to access extraverted resources. The second section outlines Uganda's long history as donor darling and shows how it reproduced its image of a reliable partner also throughout the refugee emergency. The third and fourth sections zoom in on the region where the refugees arrived in the country since 2014 have been settled, showing the extent to which it can be considered a periphery and how the central state has been extending its reach – both in terms of presence and control and in terms of delivery capacity – to the refugee hosting areas. The concluding section shows that, even though many and diverse reasons stand behind the Ugandan government's decision to implement such an open refugee policy and to welcome

11, 12, 2016; L. Hovil, "Self-Settled Refugees in Uganda: An Alternative Approach to Displacement?" *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20, 4, 2007, 599–620.

⁶ F. Ahimbisibwe, M. Belloni. "The 2006 Refugees Act in Uganda: Analyzing the Gap between Law and Practice", *Afriche e Orienti* 22, 1, 2020, 9–28; I. Soi, "Uganda-Rwanda Relations: Crossing the Border into Politics". *Afriche e Orienti*, 22, 1, 2020, 29–47.; Milner, *Refugees, the state and the politics of asylum in Africa*.

⁷ Jacobsen, "Can refugees benefit the state?"

such high numbers of refugees – as it has been shown by a variety of academic works⁸ – looking at Uganda’s contemporary experience of refugee-hosting through a state-building lens may contribute to shed light on other domestic repercussions of refugee responses.

This article relies on field research conducted in Kampala and Adjumani District in November-December 2017 and April-June 2018. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were held with refugees and host community members both in Adjumani Town and in selected refugee settlements within Adjumani District (Pagirinyia, Boroli and Mungula). Key informants such as representatives of the national and local government, staff from international organizations working in the refugee response both in the capital city and at district level, and refugee authorities were also interviewed.

Extraverted state-building and refugees

A vast and variegated set of academic literature has, in recent years, linked state-building to liberal interventionism in post-conflict societies. Conceptualising it as one of the tools of liberal peacebuilding aimed at creating liberal democratic states reflecting the requisites of Weberian statehood, these scholars have criticized its imperialist character⁹, its ineffectiveness (or only limited effectiveness) in creating functioning modern states due to the flawed assumption it relies on¹⁰, and its depoliticizing effect on profoundly political dynamics¹¹. While analysing the top-down nature of state-building related reforms, these authors typically acknowledge and, at

⁸ Soi, “Uganda-Rwanda Relations”; K. Titeca, “Who depends on whom? The dependency of international donors on the Uganda’s refugee policy ‘role model’”, unpublished, 2020.

⁹ R. Paris, “International peacebuilding and the ‘mission civilisatrice’”, *Review of International Studies*, 28 (2002), 637–56; D. Chandler, *Empire in denial: the politics of state-building*, London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto, 2006; O. Richmond, *A Post-Liberal Peace*, Routledge, 2011.

¹⁰ C. Cramer, *Civil War Is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries*. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2006; R. Belloni, “Hybrid Peace Governance: Its Emergence and Significance”. *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 18, 1, 2012, 21–38; Chandler, *Empire in denial*; J. Heathershaw, D. Lambach, “Introduction: Post-Conflict Spaces and Approaches to Statebuilding”, *Journal of Intervention & Statebuilding*, 2, 3, 2008, 269–89.

¹¹ B. Bliesemann de Guevara, “Introduction: The Limits of Statebuilding and the Analysis of State-Formation”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 4, 2, 2010, 111–28; Heathershaw e Lambach, «Introduction”.

time, emphasize local agency and the many practices of co-optation and resistance against them. The focus is therefore on the forms of governance, variously defined, produced by the encounters between top-down ideas and policies and bottom-up practices, and on the many ways in which local agency manipulates and reinterprets them¹².

Little attention has been paid to local, contemporary endogenous state-building, understood as “a conscious effort at creating an apparatus of control”¹³ perpetrated by local political actors. Jones et al. argue that the scarce acknowledgement of contemporary local state-building agendas can be explained with their difference from liberal democracy ideals on which international state-building is premised. When elements of liberal democracy do surface, it is usually about mimicry¹⁴. At the same time, however, even though keeping the grip on power or feeding patronage networks are common desires among individuals in government positions in Africa, reducing the analysis of African political regimes to the acknowledgement of these illiberal traits would be extremely reductive and would prevent us from recognizing local state-building objectives and genuine attempts to create functioning institutional apparatuses capable of broadcasting state power beyond personalized neopatrimonial networks¹⁵.

Illiberal state-builders, as they have been defined, typically aim to stabilize the internal political arena and to manage centre-periphery relations; they are well aware that these objectives cannot

¹² Belloni, “Hybrid Peace Governance”; O. P. Richmond, «Failed Statebuilding versus Peace Formation», *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48, 3, 2013, 378-400; I. Bergamaschi, “Building State Capacities? The case of the Poverty Reduction Unit in Mali”, in J.P. Olivier de Sardan, T. Bierschenk, eds., *States at Work. Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*, Leiden, Brill, 2014, 271–99; B. Berman, J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley Conflict in Kenya & Africa. Book One: State & Class*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992.; Bliesemann de Guevara, «Introduction»; T. Hagmann, D. Péclard. “Negotiating Statehood: Dynamics of Power and Domination in Africa”, *Development and Change*, 41, 4, 2010, 539–62; J. S. Migdal, K. Schlichte, “Rethinking the State”, in K. Schlichte, ed., *The Dynamics of States: The Formation and Crises of State Domination*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005, 1–40; E. Newman, R. Paris, e O. P. Richmond. *New perspectives on liberal peacebuilding*. Tokyo; New York: United Nations University Press, 2009.

¹³ Berman e Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley Conflict in Kenya & Africa. Book One: State & Class*, p.5.

¹⁴ S. de Simone, “Playing the ‘fragile state’ card: the SPLM and state extraversion in South Sudan”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 56, 3, 2018, 395-420.

¹⁵ W. Jones, R. Soares de Oliveira, H. Verhoeven, “Africa’s Illiberal State-Builders”. *RSC Working Paper Series* 89, 2013; N. Burihabwa, D. E. A. Curtis, “Have We Reached the End of Post-War Liberal Statebuilding in Africa?”, Blog post, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 October 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/10/06/have-we-reached-the-end-post-war-liberal-statebuilding-africa-governance/> (accessed 22 December 2021).

be achieved through the use of force only and therefore are often quite skilled in managing critical resources coming from providers external to the state. It is not by chance that many of them are close allies of Western countries.¹⁶ Local state-building is thus heavily reliant on external resources that make it an “extraverted” enterprise.¹⁷ In Jean-François Bayart’s formulation, extraversion refers to the capacity of a state to exploit its position of formal dependence to pursue its own agenda.¹⁸ Some of these states effectively employed extraversion strategies while becoming “donor darlings”, “managing their image”¹⁹ to secure continued support from the international community in spite of their often contradictory practices, particularly in the field of human rights and democratic governance.²⁰ This phenomenon has to do with the co-dependency relation between donors and aid-recipients: it is not only the receiving countries that become dependent from their donors but also the other way round²¹. Refugee emergencies have increasingly been integrated in this scenario. As 86% of global refugees are hosted in countries in the Global South²², which are believed to provide a “global public good”²³ through giving haven to growing numbers of people fleeing from natural and man-made disasters, international aid flows towards refugee emergencies have been growing

¹⁶ Jones, Oliveira, e Verhoeven, “Africa’s Illiberal State-Builders”.

¹⁷ de Simone, “Playing the ‘Fragile State’ Card”; J. Fisher, “Structure, agency and Africa in the international system: donor diplomacy and regional security policy in East Africa since the 1990s”, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 13, 5, 2013, 537-567; C. Peiffer, P. Englebert. “Extraversion, vulnerability to donors, and political liberalization in Africa”, *African Affairs*, 111, n. 444, 2012, 355–78.

¹⁸ J.-F. Bayart, “L’Afrique dans le monde : une histoire d’extraversion”, *Critique internationale*, 5, 1, 1999, 97–120.

¹⁹ J. Fisher, “‘Some more reliable than others’: Image management, donor perceptions and the Global War on Terror in East African diplomacy”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 51, 1, 2013, 1-31, p.2.

²⁰ D. Beswick, “Aid and Security in Post-Genocide Rwanda : The Politics of a Donor Darling”. Ph.D., University of Manchester, 2007; J. Fisher, “When it pays to be a ‘fragile state’: Uganda’s use and abuse of a dubious concept”, *Third World Quarterly*, 35, 2, 2014, 316-332; Titeca, “Who depends on whom?”

²¹ G. Harrison, “Post-Conditionality Politics and Administrative Reform: Reflections on the Cases of Uganda and Tanzania”, *Development and Change*, 32, 4, 2001. 657–79; Titeca, “Who depends on whom?”; J. Fisher, “Managing Donor Perceptions: Contextualizing Uganda’s 2007 Intervention in Somalia”, *African Affairs*, 111, 444, 2012, 404–23.

²² See UNHCR Figures at glance 2021, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> (accessed 22 December 2021).

²³ House of Commons, “Forced displacement in Africa: ‘Anchors not walls’”. International Development Committee, 2019.

in the past ten years. Despite some attempts to estimate their amount²⁴, it is very difficult to map these aid flows given the high number of multilateral, bilateral and private organizations involved, as well as the variety of humanitarian and developmental projects and programmes²⁵. Nevertheless, if we look at the funding of UNHCR Refugee Response Plans as a proxy for refugee-related international spending, data show a decisive increase in 2013-2018.

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Donors involved in funding international refugee responses need success stories too, not only to justify the amounts spent in helping the needy in faraway lands – something that does not necessarily enjoy high popularity in domestic public opinion; but also, to confirm that hosting refugees clear of European/North American borders is possible, and that it is done effectively and efficiently by several countries in the Global South²⁶.

The international community has therefore an interest in making refugee responses work in the Global South, and it is thus willing to turn a blind eye to host states' extraversion strategies involving refugee-related aid flows. Tsourapas talked of "refugee rentier states" to refer to those states that receive external resources to host large numbers of refugees: by presenting themselves as safe havens for people fleeing from neighbouring countries, they extract a rent from other state or non-state actors interested in keeping these people there²⁷. This concept is

²⁴ K. Forichon, "Financing refugee-hosting contexts. An analysis of the DAC's contribution to burden- and responsibility-sharing in supporting refugees and their host communities", OECD Development Co-operation Working Paper 48. OECD, 2018.

²⁵ L. Poole, "The refugee response in northern Uganda. Resources beyond international humanitarian assistance", HPG Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, 2019.

²⁶ Titeca, "Who depends on whom?"

²⁷ G. Tsourapas, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4, 4, 2019, 464–81, p.465.

similar to that of extraversion formulated by Bayart but makes it more specific to a refugee hosting context and sheds light on the rentier nature of the resources extracted.

Drawing on these concepts, in the following section, this paper will show that the Ugandan government has largely managed to turn the refugee presence into a state-building resource, extending the presence of the central state into some of its peripheries and ultimately strengthening Museveni's regime.

Uganda, international aid, and the refugee response

Uganda has a long-standing relationship with international donors, and a long history as a donor darling. This history starts with the successful implementation of a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) implemented by the newly installed government led by Museveni's National Resistance Movement. The sustained growth rate that the country achieved throughout the 1990s was seen as a matter of pride by International Financial Institutions, which turned Uganda into a SAP success story showing the worthiness of neoliberal reforms²⁸. Its success shielded the country from receiving critiques on its drifts towards a single-party state in the 1990s²⁹, on its ever-growing defence budget³⁰, and on corruption episodes³¹.

In the late 1990s, and even more after 11 September 2001, with a growing dependence from international aid flows for funding its domestic costs³², Uganda aptly positioned itself as a vital partner in the Global War on Terror in East Africa and the Horn. Besides participating to key anti-terrorist operations in the region³³, Museveni started framing as terrorism a variety of regional and national issues, including the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and other

²⁸ Harrison, "Post-Conditionality Politics and Administrative Reform".

²⁹ N. Kasfir, "African Ambiguities: 'No-party Democracy' in Uganda", *Journal of Democracy*, 9, 2 1998, 49–63.

³⁰ D. M. Anderson, J. Fisher, "Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Uganda", in T. Hagmann, F. Renytjiens, eds., *Aid and Authoritarianism in Africa*, London, Zed books, 2016, 67–90.

³¹ Fisher, "Structure, agency and Africa in the international system".

³² Anderson e Fisher, "Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Uganda"; N. de Torrenté, "L'Ouganda et les bailleurs de fonds", *Politique Africaine*, 75, 1999, 72-90.

³³ Fisher, "Managing Donor Perceptions".

insurgencies that opposed his power in the northern and north-western parts of the country³⁴. The government's centralized and authoritarian decision-making allowed Uganda to adopt extremely repressive anti-terrorism legislation with the complacency of the international community, and to also use it against internal opponents without provoking any considerable reaction from the side of international donors³⁵. While aid flows, particularly those directed to budget support, decreased towards the end of the 2000s following a wave of high-level corruption scandals in the country³⁶, by 2016 international assistance to Uganda had reached unprecedented levels thanks to the narrative promoted around its friendly refugee policy. Uganda has a long history of refugee-hosting. It started before independence hosting refugees from Nazi Europe; since the early 1960s it received refugee flows from all its neighbours. While in the 1970s and early 1980s it was itself the origin of refugee flows, from the late 1990s the country has been hosting a significant refugee population, mostly from Southern Sudan, DRC, Rwanda and Burundi.³⁷ Their number increased in 2012 following clashes in DRC, but it was in 2014, after the outbreak of the civil war in South Sudan, that their number suddenly hiked. Though geographical proximity partly determined people's exile trajectories, many willingly chose to go to Uganda due to its open refugee policy, which allows refugees to work, access social services and move freely on the national territory³⁸.

³⁴ Fisher, "When it pays to be a 'fragile state'"; Fisher, "Managing Donor Perceptions"; Titeca, Kristof, e Daniel Fahey, "The Many Faces of a Rebel Group: The Allied Democratic Forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo", *International Affairs*, 92, 5, 2016, 1189–1206.

³⁵ Fisher, "Some More Reliable than Others"; Anderson e Fisher, "Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Uganda".

³⁶ DEval - German Institute for Development Evaluation. "The effects of the exit from budget support in Uganda", DEval Country Sheet, 2018.

³⁷ Data from the World Bank website: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG?locations=UG> (accessed 2 July 2020)

³⁸ Interview with male refugee, Mungula 1 refugee settlement, 15 May 2018.

In the following years, the Ugandan open refugee policy was repeatedly advertised by Ugandan authorities³⁹ and praised by the international press⁴⁰, international organisations and donors⁴¹. Not even the COVID-19 pandemic changed it: after the borders were closed in mid-March 2020, they were reopened in mid-June to allow a new wave of refugees from DRC to settle in the country⁴². By September 2021, official figures placed the number of refugees hosted in Uganda at 1.5 million people.⁴³ Thanks to these numbers and to the country's virtuous policies, Uganda was chosen to start a pilot implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)⁴⁴ supported by the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPe) Strategy funded by the World Bank and the UN, with the ultimate aim of integrating refugees in Uganda's national development planning⁴⁵.

Coordinated by the OPM and UNHCR, the Uganda Refugee Response mobilized substantial amounts of foreign aid. In 2014-2018 UNHCR expenditures in the country reached unprecedented levels: from US\$91 million in 2014 to US\$1.855 million in 2018.⁴⁶ In 2016, the World Bank also committed US\$50 million to provide relief to refugees and host communities in Uganda⁴⁷, and in 2019 it approved an extension of US\$150 million for its programme⁴⁸.

³⁹ See note 3 above.

⁴⁰ "Uganda: 'One of the best places to be a refugee'", *BBC Africa*, 13 May 2016; C. Titz, M. Feck, "Uganda is the most refugee-friendly country in the world", *Spiegel Online*, 13 September 2017; "Uganda Welcomes Refugees with 'Progressive Policies'", *Voice of America*, 13 April 2017.

⁴¹ House of Commons, "Forced displacement in Africa: 'Anchors not walls'"; UNDP, "Uganda's contribution to refugee protection and management", 2017; World Bank, "An Assessment of Uganda's Progressive Approach to Refugee Management".

⁴² B. van Eyssen, "Uganda remains steadfast on refugees despite COVID-19", *DW*, 3 July 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/uganda-remains-steadfast-on-refugees-despite-covid-19/a-54041165> (accessed 6 July 2020).

⁴³ See the Ugandan Refugee Response portal, available at: <https://ugandarefugees.org/en/country/uga> (accessed 1 November 2020).

⁴⁴ The CRRF is a policy framework aimed at operationalizing the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted by the UN General Assembly. For further information see N. Crawford, S. O'Callaghan, K. Holloway, C. Lowe. "The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Progress in Uganda", HPG Working Paper. Overseas Development Institute, 2019.

⁴⁵ International Refugee Rights Initiative. "Uganda's refugee policies: The history, the politics, the way forward", 2018.

⁴⁶ Data from UNHCR website: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/5129>, (accessed 14 August 2020).

⁴⁷ World Bank, "An Assessment of Uganda's Progressive Approach to Refugee Management".

⁴⁸ World Bank, "World Bank Provides \$150 Million Grant To Support Host Communities and Refugees in Uganda", 17 April 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/04/17/world-bank-provides-150-million-grant-to-support-host-communities-and-refugees-in-uganda> (accessed 6 June 2020).

UNHCR transferred part of this aid to coordination and implementing partners, other UN agencies and international NGOs working in the various sectors of the response (education, protection, WASH, health, environment, and livelihoods) to cover the humanitarian needs of the refugees. Great attention was also placed on the developmental needs of the communities where the refugees were hosted: based on the idea that the host community should also benefit from refugee presence, the government implemented a policy that compels all organizations working in the refugee-hosting areas to spend at least 30% of the funding earmarked for the refugee response to provide goods and services to the host community⁴⁹. UNHCR also transfers a non-negligible part of its funds to the Government of Uganda to cover both the running and infrastructural costs of the refugee response, including building infrastructure, paying salaries of local officers, covering expenses for refugee-related operations such as refugee registration⁵⁰.

Contextualizing West Nile

Even though some observers have criticised the effectiveness of the refugee response, with overall refugee self-reliance not really increasing over time⁵¹, the developmental nature of the refugee response is nonetheless important especially when considering its geographical localization. The geographical distribution of refugees is roughly consistent with the location of their country of origin, with refugee settlements generally being set up in the border region. The huge refugee flow from South Sudan since early 2014 thus turned West Nile sub-region

⁴⁹ UNHCR. “Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan”, 2018. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63273#:~:text=In%20line%20with%20the%20Uganda,wherever%20feasible%20and%20contextually%20relevant> (accessed 3 May 2020).

⁵⁰ Office of Internal Oversight Services, “Audit of the operations in Uganda for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees”, United Nations, 2018; World Bank, “Project paper on a proposed additional grant in the amount of SDR 108.6 million (US\$150 million equivalent) of which SDR 90.5 million (US\$ 125 million equivalent) is from the Refugee Sub-Window to the Republic of Uganda for the Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project in the Horn of Africa”, 27 March 2019.

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/347371555812093462/pdf/Uganda-Development-Response-to-Displacement-Impacts-Project-in-the-Horn-of-Africa-Project.pdf>. (accessed 3 May 2020); C. Degnan, A. Kattakuzhy, “Money Talks. Assessing funding flows to local and national actors in Uganda”, Research Report, Oxfam, 2019. Interview with Adjumani Deputy RDO, Adjumani Town, 17 May 2018

⁵¹ Crawford et al., “The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Progress in Uganda”; International Refugee Rights Initiative, “Uganda’s refugee policies: The history, the politics, the way forward”.

into the largest refugee-hosting area of the entire country. While a small minority of the refugees was transferred to Kiryandongo refugee settlement, in the western part of the country, the great majority was settled in refugee settlements located in Adjumani, Arua, Moyo and Yumbe districts, in the north-west.

West Nile sub-region has historically been an extremely marginalized area. During the colonial era, it was a labour force basin inhabited by numerous ethnic groups that remained excluded also from post-colonial development projects⁵². The area went through a recent history of political turmoil starting with the ascendance to power of Idi Amin. The latter was a native from the area and completely replaced the Acholi and Langi elite that dominated the army under Obote with West Nilers. When he was overthrown in 1979, the Ugandan Army fled *en masse* to West Nile fearing retaliation by the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), moving to Sudan when retaliations actually begun⁵³. The stigmatization and criminalization of the whole of West Nile population laid the basis for several insurgencies starting in the early 1980s. Insurgent groups only received limited support from the local population and, instead, kept a predatory attitude towards civilians. They conducted attacks against the government until they were invited to join the (very short lived) executive formed by Tito Okello⁵⁴. When, shortly after, Museveni took power in 1986, a period of calm ensued for the region. He did not start military campaigns against insurgents in West Nile, and rather adopted a strategy of co-optation of selected rebel leaders. Nevertheless, the climate of suspicion and tensions persisted. Grievances concerning the non-integration of former insurgents into the National Resistance Army and the harassment and killing of individuals close to the insurgent groups led to a new wave of insurgency by the mid-1990s.

⁵² A. Bogner, D. Neubert, "Negotiated Peace, Denied Justice? The Case of West Nile (Northern Uganda)". *Africa Spectrum*, 48, 3, 2013, 55–84.

⁵³ M. Leopold, *Inside West Nile: Violence, History & Representation on an African Frontier*. World Anthropology. Oxford: Currey, 2005. Estimates suggest that 80% of West Nile population was displaced.

⁵⁴ Refugee Law Project, *Negotiating Peace: Resolution of Conflicts in Uganda's West Nile Region*, Working Paper, 12, Kampala, Makerere University, 2004.

The two newly formed insurgent groups, the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) and the Uganda National Rescue Front (UNRF) II claimed to be fighting against the marginalization of the region and the lack of basic services such as education facilities⁵⁵, but neither of them managed to build a good relationship with the local population⁵⁶.

West Nile insurgencies were resolved between the late 1990s and early 2000s, thanks to a wise management of the conflict and the creation of some degree of confidence between the government and the local population⁵⁷. Development initiatives were also supported, with the creation of Yumbe district and of several veteran associations receiving a major share of the humanitarian and development assistance to the area. However, development funds were quickly diverted to reconstruction programmes for the areas targeted by the Lord's Resistance Army, which, in the mid-2000s, had moved out of Acholiland⁵⁸. Many projects in West Nile were therefore left unimplemented. Feelings of marginalization resurfaced, leading former rebels to threaten new insurgencies. Consequently, besides responding to immediate threats with the reinforcement of security measures and the approval of new funding to the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund⁵⁹, the government started turning a blind eye towards local initiatives such as transborder informal trade, hoping to reduce local people's propensity to turn to political violence⁶⁰.

Currently, West Nile sub-region still has lower development indicators than the national average, which have been estimated by the Uganda Human Development Report 2015⁶¹.

⁵⁵ Leopold, *Inside West Nile*; Refugee Law Project, *Negotiating Peace: Resolution of Conflicts in Uganda's West Nile Region*.

⁵⁶ Refugee Law Project, *Negotiating Peace: Resolution of Conflicts in Uganda's West Nile Region*.

⁵⁷ Refugee Law Project, *Negotiating Peace: Resolution of Conflicts in Uganda's West Nile Region*; Bogner e Neubert, "Negotiated Peace, Denied Justice?"

⁵⁸ For a comprehensive account of the fight against the LRA and the reconstruction process in Northern Uganda, see A. Branch, *Displacing Human Rights: War and Intervention in Northern Uganda*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁵⁹ Bogner e Neubert, "Negotiated Peace, Denied Justice?"

⁶⁰ K. Titeca, T. de Herdt, "Regulation, Cross-Border Trade and Practical Norms in West Nile, North-Western Uganda", *Africa*, 80, 4, 2010, 573–94.

⁶¹ UNDP, *Uganda Human Development Report 2015. Unlocking the Development Potential of Northern Uganda*, 2015.

State-building in the periphery

Given its profile as a marginalized periphery with a recent history of anti-government insurgencies, West Nile could potentially represent a breach in the Ugandan state capacity of controlling its territory. The developmental rhetoric around the refugee response, and the need to enable local host communities to benefit from refugee presence, can thus be looked at as a strategy to improve central relations with that periphery through building state capacity and strengthening the presence of the state in the area. Nevertheless, it is not the local state structure – in its decentralized institutions – to be build; but rather, as we shall see, through extending the central state’s control and enhancing its direct delivery capacity.

The marginalization of the local government

The Ugandan refugee response is managed through a dedicated agency that responds directly to the central executive. The Refugees Department of the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness, Management and Refugees is located under the direct supervision of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). It carries out its functions through the Refugee Desk Officer (RDO), who represents the OPM in each refugee-hosting district and reports directly to the Commissioner for Refugees appointed by the President. Camp Commandants oversee each refugee settlement and report to the RDO.

Such centralized management of the refugee response runs in parallel to the existing local government, organized in a five-layer system of Local Councils (from Local Council V, the district level, to Local Council I, the village level). According to the Ugandan Constitution (1995) and Local Government Act (1996), district governments oversee local development

planning, but they have largely been ineffective in bringing services to the people and rather used as a political tool to reward local allies of the regime⁶².

Partly due to this ineffectiveness, and partly to the high sensitivity of the refugee topic, decision-making processes and financial flows around refugee-related development projects have been kept firmly in the hands of central authorities, excluding the local governments⁶³. District authorities have raised complaints of being systematically bypassed by OPM authorities in the planning process⁶⁴, particularly because, despite some efforts to include the refugees into the National Development Plan II 2015/2020, their number has since grown exponentially and spending has consequently increased beyond what was foreseen in local government budgets. This was also acknowledged by senior officials in international agencies.⁶⁵

One of my interviewees from the local government made a long list of district level committees involved in monitoring different aspects of the refugee response in their area, but admitted that, since refugees' arrival in the early 2000s, district authorities were excluded from planning and making decisions over the allocation of refugee funds, and that whatever point they wanted to make on refugee management or on the location of service facilities built in the district in the framework of the refugee response, they had to pass through OPM.⁶⁶

Major donors and aid agencies working in the refugee response put very little effort in trying to empower local governments to carry out their constitutional mandates. District governments

⁶² E. D. Green, "Decentralisation and Conflict in Uganda". *Conflict, Security & Development*, 8, 4, 2008, 427–50.; J. Ayeko-Kümmeth, "Districts creation and its impact on local government in Uganda", *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 8, 3, 2014, 81–91; Crawford et al., "The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Progress in Uganda".

⁶³ Telephone interview with senior staff of International NGO, Kampala, 12 June 2020; Interview with Adjumani District Planner, Adjumani Town, 14 May 2018. This was true also in the early 2000s, when refugee affairs were still under the Ministry of Local Government but were excluded from the competences of the districts because UNHCR and the Ministry were expected to cater for them independently. T. Kaiser, "The Experience and Consequences of Insecurity in a Refugee Populated Area in Northern Uganda 1996-97", *Refugee Survey Quarterly – UNHCR*, 19, 1, 2000, 38–53.

⁶⁴ Interview with Adjumani District Planner, Adjumani Town, 14 May 2018.

⁶⁵ Interview with senior UN Official, Kampala, 1 December 2017; Interview with International Organization official, Kampala, 1 December 2017.

⁶⁶ Interview with Adjumani LC V Councillor, Adjumani Town, 18 May 2018.

are mentioned in major UNHCR documents as “partners” providing “technical support”, but what this actually means is never clarified in early Refugee Response Plans (UNHCR, 2014: 64). The World Bank hardly ever mentions district authorities, even though the activities foreseen in its Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project mostly target the district level. It acknowledges that district governments oversee planning for development, but the project only engages with them through the deployment of project-related personnel at district level. All the decision-making rests with OPM and the project management⁶⁷.

Indeed, a widespread perception is that the local branches of OPM greatly increased their presence and operational capacity since the beginning of the refugee response. Local offices have been constructed, staff recruited, vehicles operated. One official in Rhino Camp refugee settlement, Arua District, went as far as claiming that UNHCR funded 100 per cent OPM budget at district level.⁶⁸ Even though it was not possible to verify this statement, it suggests a quite close relationship between the refugee response and OPM functioning at the local level. Even though, since the adoption of the CRRF, action has been taken to reduce this centralisation⁶⁹, international agencies have only limitedly started coordinating development strategies of the refugee response with district development plans⁷⁰.

Centralized service delivery

Among the local population, there was widespread belief that the refugee response would have improved the delivery of basic services such as education and healthcare and the provision of security. In several instances, local community leaders reported to have explicitly asked OPM to start a refugee settlement in their area to benefit from these assets, and saw refugee presence

⁶⁷ World Bank, “Project paper on a proposed additional grant”.

⁶⁸ Interview with Rhino Camp Assistant Camp Commandant, Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement, Arua District, 24 May 2018.

⁶⁹ One example is the involvement of the refugees in the preparation of development plans and the participation of district authorities to the CRRF Steering Group. Interview with Adjumani District Planner, Adjumani Town, 14 May 2018.

⁷⁰ CEPA, “The Impact of Refugee Influx to Social Service Delivery in District Host Communities. A case of Hoima, Lamwo, Moyo, and Yumbe refugee host communities”, Fact Finding Study Report, USAID, UKAID, 2018.

as an opportunity not so much to create economic development and growth in the local community, but rather to be seen and taken care of by the state and its international partners⁷¹. Despite the emergence of problems related to overpopulation such as environmental degradation and access to land, a wide majority of my interviewees from the host community in Adjumani district in 2018 still declared to be happy of the presence of refugee settlements in the proximity of their community.⁷²

While, at the local government level, districts had repeatedly failed to deliver in terms of basic services to the population and local district officers complained of being powerless vis-à-vis the refugee response, at the national level the CRRF encouraged ministries to produce sectoral refugee response plans to guide development investments in the refugee hosting areas⁷³. Even though evidence suggests that the quality of the services provided through the refugee response was poor and that continued influx was not met with adequate investment, causing the overwhelming of existing infrastructures⁷⁴, perceptions in the rural areas in Adjumani districts about the national government performance in the management of the refugee response, and the related delivery of basic services to the host community, remained overall positive, with only some circumscribed grievances related to the negotiation of land deals with OPM representatives to expand the settlements⁷⁵.

⁷¹ Interview with Aliwara Village Landlords, Adjumani District, 11 May 2018.

⁷² Interviews with LC1 Chairman of Mokonoyoro Village, Adjumani District, 8 May 2018; LC1 Chairman of Aliwara Village, Adjumani District, 11 May 2018; LC1 Chairman of Orungua Village, Adjumani District, 15 May 2018.

⁷³ Ministry of Education and Sports, “The Education Response Plan (ERP) 2018-2021”, Republic of Uganda, 2018; Ministry of Health, “Health Sector Integrated Refugee Response Plan”, Republic of Uganda, 2019.

⁷⁴ Uganda Bureau of Statistics, “Statistical Abstract”, Republic of Uganda, 2020; CEPA, “The Impact of Refugee Influx to Social Service Delivery in District Host Communities”; B. Sabiti, “Uganda’s “Generous” Refugee Policy: Museveni’s other Con Job on The West”, Blog Post, UgLish, 16 April 2017, <https://ugandanenglish.wordpress.com/2017/04/16/ugandas-generous-refugee-policy-musevenis-other-con-job-on-the-west/> (accessed 8 May 2020).

⁷⁵ Interviews with LC1 Chairman of Mokonoyoro Village, Adjumani District, 8 May 2018; LC1 Chairman of Aliwara Village, Adjumani District, 11 May 2018; LC1 Chairman of Orungua Village, Adjumani District, 15 May 2018.

The “developmental character” of the refugee response, through the delivery of basic services also to host communities, thus contributes projecting an image of the central state that cares for its peripheries and that takes action to improve a situation of marginalization. Besides being appreciated by many of my interviewees from the host community in Adjumani District, this is also reflected, to some extent, in electoral results, with Museveni obtaining growing success at presidential elections since 2011 and exceeding 70% of votes at the 2021 polls in some of the most remote refugee hosting districts (Adjumani, Moyo and Yumbe)⁷⁶.

Conclusions

In 2018, a major scandal on the misuse of refugee funds unfolded⁷⁷. Refugee numbers had been inflated, irregular procurement procedures had been implemented, unaccountable civil servants were subsidized, goods and services were often overpaid to please contractors. Several studies have demonstrated that, while the government reaction is always to put the blame on individuals’ greed and to dismiss some big wigs identified as scapegoats, corruption and patronage form an intrinsic part of state functioning in Uganda⁷⁸. These networks do serve the purpose of regime consolidation, but cannot explain, by themselves, neither the longevity of Museveni’s regime nor the relative support that it still enjoys in peripheral areas of the country such as the West Nile sub-region. This paper has shown that the refugee emergency that Uganda has been living through since 2014 has not only been used to feed these patronage networks⁷⁹,

⁷⁶ Uganda Electoral Commission, “Presidential Elections, February 2011. District Tally Sheet”; Uganda Electoral Commission, “Presidential Elections, 2016. District Summary Report - Final Results”; Uganda Electoral Commission, “Presidential Elections 2021. District Summary Report”.

⁷⁷ S. Okiror, “The Refugee Scandal unfolding in Uganda”, *IRIN News*, 25 July 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/07/25/refugee-scandal-unfolding-uganda> (accessed 26 February 2018); B. Parker, “Audit finds UN refugee agency critically mismanaged donor funds in Uganda”, *The New Humanitarian*, 28 November 2018, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2018/11/28/audit-finds-un-refugee-agency-critically-mismanaged-donor-funds-uganda> (accessed 23 March 2020).

⁷⁸ Green, “Decentralisation and Conflict in Uganda”; J. I. Lewis, “When Decentralization Leads to Recentralization: Subnational State Transformation in Uganda”, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 24, 5, 2014, 571–88.

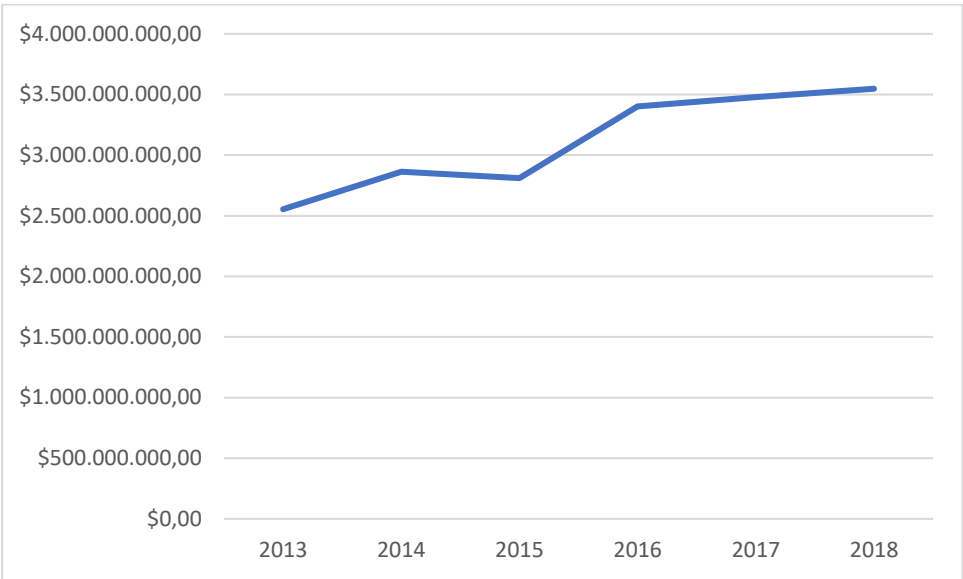
⁷⁹ Titeca, “Who depends on whom?”

but also to raise resources that were employed to strengthen the central state presence and capacity in peripheral regions of the country.

The capacity of the Ugandan state to “harden” its presence in West Nile and other marginal areas plays a double function, ultimately serving local endogenous state-building purposes: on the one hand, it increases the physical presence of the state in marginal areas through the presence of security forces, government buildings, etc., and, consequently, its capacity of controlling the territory; on the other hand, it strengthens state legitimacy through strengthening the state’s delivery function. The strengthening of the central state is done to the detriment of the local governments, which are supposed to represent the state at the local level but remain incapable of delivering to the citizens and excluded from the resources and the power deriving from the international refugee response. At the same time, the narrative of a strong central state capable of handling situation of emergency such as a huge refugee crisis while also delivering to its citizens in areas that were previously marginalized, both renews the image of Uganda as a reliable partner to the international community and increases local people’s support to the incumbent regime.

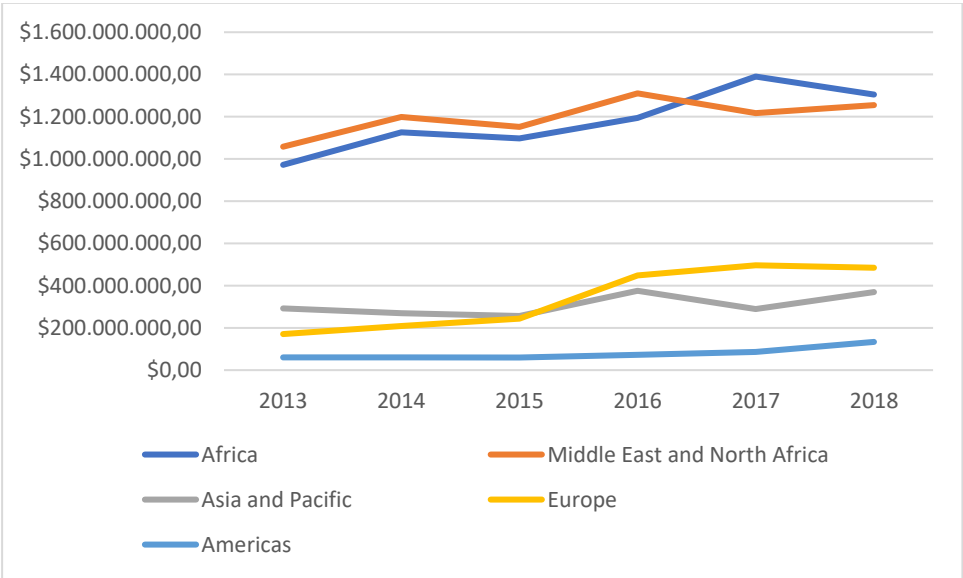
Figures

Figure 1. UNHCR total expenditures



Source: UNHCR Global Focus

Figure 2. UNHCR Expenditures per region



Source: UNHCR Global Focus