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Refugees in Uganda between Politics and Everyday Practices

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Investigating the 'Refugee Paradise': Refugees in Uganda between Politics and Everyday Practices. An Introduction

In his opening speech at the Solidarity Summit on Refugees held in Kampala in June 2017, UN Secretary General António Guterres defined Uganda as "a symbol of integrity of the refugee-protection regime".[1] It did not take very long before the image of such a 'refugee paradise', as it had been repeatedly described by the international press,[2] crumbled under the weight of one of the major corruption scandal that involved Museveni's government, together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) country office.[3] The scandal showed that Uganda's goodwill in hosting large numbers of refugees did not simply stem from humanitarianism, or from Ugandans' own experiences of exile in the region, which made them particularly welcoming towards neighbouring people fleeing violence, but rather fed a large corruption system that reached up to the higher ranks of the Office of the Prime Minister – the Ugandan body in charge of refugee protection.

This Dossier of *afriche e orienti* takes a step back from these events that unfolded between late 2017 and 2018 and, through six contributions by authors with different disciplinary backgrounds and field of study, seeks to look inside the 'refugee paradise', investigating its characteristics and dynamics in a historical perspective.

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees. It started during the Second World War,

when it hosted Polish nationals and Jews fleeing the Nazi regime. With its strategic position in a region historically characterized by political instability and conflict, the country has later on received exiles from Congo, Central African Republic, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Burundi. Originally conceived as a system of control rather than protection with the Control of Alien Refugees Act of 1960, Uganda's refugee legal framework was always interpreted in a progressive way, especially if compared to its neighbours. Since the inception of Yoweri Museveni's government, it underwent an increasingly progressive turn: in 1987 the country ratified the 1969 Refugee Convention of the Organization of African Unity (OAU); in the early 1990s a new Refugee Bill started being discussed; and in 1999 the Self Reliance Strategy (SRS) was launched by the government in partnership with the UNHCR. Besides providing for the integration of the services provided to the refugees into regular local government structures and policies, the SRS supported the transformation of refugees from passive subjects in need of humanitarian aid into active agents of development for the host country. A new Refugees Act was passed in 2006, followed by Refugees Regulations aimed to operationalize it in 2010. Subsequently, policies such as the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA) and the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) reiterated the need to protect refugees making them self-reliant and bringing development and services to the refugee hosting areas.

In contrast with the broader East African region, where refugee policies are widely based on encampment and control, preventing refugees – at least officially – from participating to the social and economic life of their host country, Uganda recognizes them the right to work, access public services, and move freely over its national territory. Thanks to the extremely welcoming attitude of the Ugandan government, repeatedly advertised in numerous international forums,[4] the country was selected as a pilot for the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) launched in 2017 following the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2016, and received substantial amounts of international aid in support of its refugee response.[5]

What is behind this idyllic picture? To what extent the narrative of Uganda as "the best place to be a refugee" corresponds to the lived experiences of the refugees themselves? In addressing these questions, this special issue is divided into two parts. The first one, comprising the contributions of Ahimbisibwe & Belloni, Soi and Cole, focuses on the gaps in the refugee protection regime. Despite its progressive legal framework, Ugandan refugee protection system is marred by implementation shortcomings. By focusing on four specific aspects of the refugee protection system (the protection from persecution in the country of asylum, the implementation of the so-called Cessation Clause provided for by Article 1C(5) of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, the granting of refugee status to particular groups of asylum seekers and the support to voluntary repatriation of the refugees), Ahimbisibwe & Belloni's paper shows the extent

to which these implementation gaps intertwine with the complex web of diplomatic relationships between Uganda and its neighbours. These gaps are not equal for all: their distribution and the way refugees and asylum seekers experience them largely depend on Uganda's security concerns and on the relations that the host government maintains with refugees' countries of origin. Isabella Soi's contribution delves into the debate over the role of diplomacy and foreign policy in refugee reception by zooming in on the case of Rwandan refugees in Uganda, and by countering the narrative around refugees as apolitical subjects. Through a rich historical assessment of Uganda-Rwanda relations and of Rwandan refugees' presence in Uganda, she emphasizes the participation of refugees in shaping the broader political relations between the two countries. The dynamics of border-crossing can thus no longer be considered as something that happens in the peripheries of the state, which simply determines a change of status from citizen to foreigner/asylum seeker at individual level, but it has important consequences on the states themselves and on their reciprocal relations.

While the first two contributions focus on the implementation gaps of the refugee regime investigating the reasons for their existence, Georgia Cole addresses them from a slightly different perspective, asking who benefits from their existence and their reproduction. Interestingly, her findings confirm what Ahimbisibwe and Belloni and Soi argue – that they depended on deeply political dynamics involving the Ugandan government and the relations with its neighbours –, but also provides rich evidence that the distribution of benefits is much wider and transversal. For example, analysing the application process to obtain refugee status by Eritrean nationals, she highlights the existence of a thick web of intermediaries (both Ugandan and Eritreans, private individuals or public officers) from which the success of the application largely depends. This, she argues, does not only benefit this group of entrepreneurs that make money out of asylum seekers; it also provides a secure and predictable path to obtaining status for a group of asylum seekers that would otherwise be systematically neglected.

Cole's paper provides a sort of trait-d'union with the contributions that form the second part of the special issue, which rather focuses on refugees' coping and survival strategies in the host country. Luca Jourdan's paper gets back to the Eritrean community in Kampala reiterating some of Cole's insights on Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees in Uganda, but rather from a bottom-up perspective. He provides a rich ethnographic account of Eritreans' life in the Ugandan capital, highlighting the paradoxes of an extremely closed community in which internal relations are at the same time characterized by suspicion and mistrust. Their limited propensity to engage with the host community and host state is matched with an ambivalent relationship with the Eritrean state, which largely influences their coping strategies in Uganda.

Sara de Simone's and Borri, Gusman & Pennacini's contributions address the issue of refugee's agency even more explicitly. They both question the image of refugees as passive victims and emphasize their creative coping strategies to navigate the hardship

of exile. Sara de Simone sheds light on the processes of identity production among South Sudanese refugees as a form of agency. She analyses different social dynamics characterising refugees' practices in the settlements and in Adjumani town showing that the process of identity production is highly situational and that, even though it does not represent a form of transformative agency, it provides a powerful tool of social navigation to make refugees' lives more secure and predictable. Borri, Gusman and Pennacini's contribution retains the comparison between refugee settlements and urban areas in analysing the quest for therapy among different refugee groups in Bidibidi refugee settlement and in Kampala. They too show that refugees' choices are situational, based on the therapeutic offer and on the level of vulnerability of refugees, but that they ultimately also express a form of agency that enables refugees to be active subjects in the production of their own healing strategies.

The six papers provide a rich and variegated portrait of Uganda's contemporary refugee response, analysing it both from an institutional and policy perspective and from a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing the lived experiences of the refugees themselves. In keeping this double perspective, which is investigated through a wealth of micro-level case studies, this Dossier of *afriche e orienti* seeks to contribute to the understanding of the broader phenomenon of forced migration within the African continent which has been steadily growing over the past thirty years.

Sara de Simone, *editor of the Dossier*

NOTES:

1 - *Secretary-General Praises Uganda's 'Exemplary' Commitment to Refugees, Calls upon International Community to Follow Suit*, "United Nations", 22 June 2017: https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sgsm18587.doc.htm.

2 - *Uganda: 'One of the best places to be a refugee'*, "BBC News", 13 May 2016: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/36286472; *Uganda Welcomes Refugees with 'Progressive Policies'*, «Voice of America», 13 April 2017: https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/uganda-welcomes-refugees-with-pregressive-policies/3801353.html; *Uganda is the most refugee-friendly country in the world*, «Spiegel Online», 13 September 2017: https://www.spiegel.de/international/tomorrow/uganda-is-the-most-refugee-friendly-country-in-the-world-a-1167294.html.

3 - 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.

4 - See 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, 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/.

5 - Data from UNHCR website: https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/5129.

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