The Accidental City: Urbanisation in an East-African refugee camp

Refugee camps are regarded as temporary settlements, organised according to the functionality of humanitarian operations. According to this political view, refugees are passive recipients of aid and the dynamics of life in the camps remain hidden. Instead, refugee camps can be seen as emerging urban environments.

When entering Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, notions of time and space become obsolete, not only because of the many years of existence of the camp, but especially as a result of the social and material processes that occur in it. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2006, the author presents a follow up on earlier observations by Agier (2002) and Montclos and Kagwanja (2000), 5 - 8 years later.

Kakuma refugee camp

Kakuma refugee camp was established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1992 and by early 2006 hosted approximately 95,000 inhabitants, mainly from Sudan and Somalia but to a lesser extent also from the Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. The camp is located in the semi-arid Turkana region of Kenya, which borders Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda.

Kenyan refugee policy stipulates that refugees are not allowed to venture outside of the virtual camp walls and are not to interfere with the natural resources of the nomads. They are officially not allowed to work or integrate in Kenyan society, rendering them dependent on food handouts.

Inside those virtual walls, however, an informal economy has evolved that provides livelihood opportunities for refugees beyond the basic measures of protection that are provided by UNHCR and NGOs, and which stretch beyond the camp limits in various ways. The camp has become like a city in a pastoralist desert.

Diversity of people and livelihoods

The camp knows a diversity of people, lifestyles, cultures, religions, livelihoods and skills, which exceed pure humanitarian aspects of a refugee situation and include more developmental aspects. For example, in 2005 the camp had four secondary schools, 23 primary schools and seven pre-schools that accounted for a total of 33,000 students. These students are enrolled in education programmes that follow the Kenyan curriculum and lead to the corresponding diplomas. Education is even provided for the blind and there is a girls’ primary boarding school, intended to keep girls in school in a secured environment.

Refugees are often presented as a homogeneous group or as target groups for intervention – women, children, or the elderly. In Kakuma, however, other socio-economic strata have emerged, as there is a (visible and invisible) division of labour and livelihoods (merchants and their employees, the clergy such as sheiks and pastors and refugee leaders, incentive workers employed by the aid agencies, and those who receive remittances from abroad or have income and opportunities from Kenyan cities such as Nairobi). The refugees who are totally dependent on handouts can be seen as a form of poor ‘under-class’.

Food

The food rations for refugees are not sufficient, and subject to budget cuts and regular fluctuations in the provision of beans, maize, oil and salt. Opportunities for food production in the camp are limited due to the climate, the minimal amount of space available and regulations. There are some multi-storey gardens, small-scale home-grown vegetables, and some people raise rabbits or chickens for consumption.

It is difficult to estimate the amount of products produced and sold, but they are not enough and most products sold in the camp are imported from elsewhere, in turn providing market opportunities for the surrounding local Turkana population.
The markets for fresh vegetables and goat meat are very large. The local Turkana sell cattle, goats, camels, chickens and vegetables to the refugees, either through shops or directly to the refugees. Conversely, the refugees also sell their rations and small produce to locals (maize for sorghum for instance). Shops in the camp import a variety of products from Nairobi and the Dadaab camp, the only other UNHCR-run refugee location in Kenya, or even from overseas. Bicycles, clothing, suitcases, radios, cassette and CD players and a wide variety of household items are sold, including cosmetics and hygiene products. People have mobile phones and at the time of the study there were two internet cafes in the camp, whereas in the surrounding towns there were none.

**Social change**

In the economy of Kakuma, enterprise, social change and social and human capital are strongly related to each other. A refugee who finished secondary school can be employed as a school teacher, which can provide the cash needed by a relative to start up a business. The example of specific types of entrepreneurship from a neighbouring community can stimulate people to start something themselves. Moreover, people who get resettled become donors for their kin who remain in the camp by sending remittances. The presence of satellite TVs in the bars and restaurants in the camp (in itself an entering initiative) impact people by providing access to media and stimulating youth cultures, or bringing in new ideas for business.

Human flows connect the camp to the outside. During the study period, NGOs and companies working in Sudan came on a nearly daily basis to recruit (refugee) personnel in the camp who had experience and training as teachers, clinical officers, nurses and so on. Similar linkages exist between Kenyan cities and the camp, and between the local host population and the camp.

The camp has partly become a place where there are resources to be found, including first and foremost education and resettlement, but also traditional refugee hosting services such as protection, health services and food (Jansen 2008). In 2006, an estimated 2000 refugees from Tanzania came to Kakuma.

Refugee camp economies contradict the problems associated with protracted refugee situations. One of those problems is that refugees in Kenya (as in many other camps) are officially not allowed to work. Inside the camp, however, what is officially allowed in this respect and what actually takes place can differ greatly. The same applies to travel. While refugees are officially restricted to the camp, some can be seen departing for and returning from Nairobi, other Kenyan cities and even Sudan on a daily basis. Refugees thus negotiate their way through restrictions to find possibilities and opportunities. In this sense, various transactions take place outside the scope of the agencies.

**Supporting surrounding communities**

It is an increasingly recognised facet of protracted refugee situations that camps can actually contribute something to refugee hosting environments, instead of primarily causing disorder, resource depletion or environmental degradation. “We are nothing without these refugees, if they go, we’ll have to fly the Palestinians in”, said a local Turkana man who lives in Kakuma town next to the camp, indicating that Kakuma town and its growing community benefit greatly from the existence of the camp. Many “drop-out pastoralists” have settled around the camp seeking livelihoods inside the camp and in its environs. According to estimates by the UN and the local chief, their numbers grew to between 45,000 and 65,000 in 2006.

While some friction is caused by the reality (or paradox?) that many refugees are “better off” than members of the local Turkana community, most locals believe they would be far worse off without the refugees. The camp has become something of a paradox: a temporary place that slowly shakes its features of temporality through processes of place-making that are similar to forms of urbanisation, with no end in sight as of yet.

Bram J. Jansen, Wageningen University  
Email: bramologie@yahoo.co.uk

The author is currently a Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain, and is finalising a PhD with the Disaster Studies department at Wageningen University, the Netherlands, funded by WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research).

Members of the Somali community started a microcredit system to aid business initiatives by women’s groups. As soon as one group had repaid its debt a slot opened up for another group; this system is in a way similar to that of an agency offering microcredit. The NGO discourse on refugee dependency has a tendency to overlook these activities that are outside of the intervention area. Somali leaders estimated that nearly 90 percent of their population in the camp was no longer dependent on UNHCR handouts (similar estimates come from the Dadaab camps).