
Urban-Based Refugees' Rights to the City

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban-based refugees are refugees who, in pursuit of opportunities and resources, reside in towns and cities, often in self-settlement systems. This contrasts with refugees in camps or rural settlements, who are typically provided with basic necessities like food, water, and sometimes schooling and healthcare by the United Nations Refugee Agency or host governments. Urban-based refugees must navigate urban life independently, seeking their own livelihoods and access to services. While refugees within self-settlement systems have rights to free movement within the host country, they are also responsible for their own accommodation and sustenance. Although self-settlement systems also exist in rural areas, their more popular and unique urban nature stems from refugees' preference of cities as offering better economic prospects and access to social amenities when compared to camps or rural settlements with limited opportunities.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned opportunities, urban living presents a complex environment for refugees. While cities may offer potential for economic development, they are also characterized

by high inequality, poverty, and limited resources in many parts of the Global South. Consequently, urban refugees face a labyrinth of challenges that go beyond the traditional metrics of economic well-being. As urban centers become epicenters of rapid population growth and socioeconomic disparity across the Global South, understanding the non-economic dimensions of refugee integration (such as housing, social protection, and community networks) is both timely and imperative.

This brief addresses two fundamental questions. First, what structural and social factors shape urban refugees' ability to secure essential rights and services in a rapidly urbanizing environment? Second, how can policymakers reframe and refine urban development strategies to better support refugee communities to ensure that they are not merely surviving but are empowered to achieve upward social mobility? These inquiries are crucial as the dynamics of self-settlement systems reveal that, despite the resilience and resourcefulness of refugee networks, significant gaps remain in public policy frameworks that are often biased toward economic inclusion.

This brief demonstrates that while urban based refugees deploy innovative strategies to build networks of solidarity and access non-economic resources, their experiences also underscore the limitations of current policy responses. This brief thus provides targeted recommendations for local and national policymakers, advocating for a holistic approach to urban integration that recognizes the multidimensional nature of refugee challenges. By highlighting both the obstacles and the adaptive capacities of refugee communities, this policy brief aims to contribute to more equitable and sustainable urban policy frameworks that address the full spectrum of refugees' social rights.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This brief is based on a comprehensive study I carried out on urban refugees' access to social rights in South Africa. The research was conducted over a two-year period in Pietermaritzburg (a key urban center in KwaZulu-Natal), where I engaged Congolese refugees through interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were selected via community networks and snowball sampling, ensuring a diverse range of voices from informal economic sectors, such as street trading and barbering. Data collection focused on personal experiences with housing, social protection, and access to education. The insights presented in this brief draw solely on firsthand fieldwork and corroborated policy reports, providing a clear evidentiary basis for the recommendations offered here.

3. KEY INSIGHTS

Employment and income focused policy discourses miss the multidimensional challenges that refugees face

While much of the policy discourse tends to center on income-based metrics and employment opportunities, urban refugees experience multidimensional challenges that extend far beyond economic participation/inclusion. For many refugees, securing basic yet fundamental rights is the first step toward achieving dignity, social stability, and a sense of belonging in an urban context.

Refugees in South Africa often face challenges to securing affordable housing despite their resilience and determination. Without any policy framework outlining non-citizens' entitlements to low-income housing (and the subsequent rejection of their refugee ID numbers for available housing programs), urban-based refugees in South Africa face significant challenges in benefitting from the National Housing Subsidy Program, the Emergency Housing program and Subsidized Rental of Council Housing, as well as the National Housing Program for the upgrading of informal settlement (McDonald 1998; Makhema 2009). This situation highlights a critical policy gap: current housing policies and administrative practices fail to accommodate the realities of refugees' lived experiences, thereby perpetuating their marginalization.

Equally concerning is the restricted access to social protection measures. Many refugees, particularly those with precarious legal statuses, endure prolonged periods without access to essential social grants and public assistance. Some refugees, despite living in the country for several years, remain caught in a bureaucratic limbo due to expired permits or complicated renewal processes. This exclusion not only undermines their immediate welfare but also hampers their potential for upward social mobility (Crush and Skinner 2017). Robust and inclusive social protection frameworks are indispensable for transforming self-settlement into genuine urban inclusion.

Tertiary education also plays a vital role in fostering long-term self-reliance and integration. Despite the assumption that urban spaces naturally offer better educational opportunities, refugees often encounter formidable obstacles in accessing higher education. Barriers such as exorbitant tuition fees, non-recognition of asylum seeker documentation, and limited availability of financial support effectively block the pathway to advanced learning. Ensuring that refugees can pursue tertiary education is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic investment in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the urban economy (UN HABITAT 2022). When refugees are empowered with the right to education, they are better positioned to break the cycle of dependency and marginalization.

Another element that reinforces the importance of non-economic rights is the role of social networks or “networks of homophily” that refugees develop. These networks serve as critical lifelines, providing both material assistance (such as shared housing arrangements), and emotional support during times of vulnerability. While these networks are instrumental in mitigating the risks associated with limited state support, however, they can also inadvertently reinforce exclusion if they become too insular. It is therefore crucial that policy interventions not only recognize and bolster these networks but also work to bridge them with broader community resources and state services (Tippens 2020). This dual strategy could help transform informal support systems into a foundation for comprehensive urban integration.

Existing self-settlement models do not align with the complex socio-political realities of refugees’ urban lives

Existing self-settlement models in the Global South, particularly in South Africa, are structurally inadequate. These models often assume a level of autonomy and self-reliance that does not align with the complex socio-political realities refugees face in urban settings. The current policy framework essentially forces refugees into a false dichotomy: either they are expected to be entirely self-sufficient or they are left perpetually vulnerable due to exclusion from state-sponsored programs (Ager and Strang 2008).

Legal and administrative hurdles systematically disenfranchise refugees

Refugees holding Section 22 asylum seeker permits are categorically denied access to certain social benefits that are readily available to those with Section 24 refugee status. This two-tiered system creates a stark disparity in rights and opportunities within the refugee community itself. This is a clarion call for policy reform – one that calls for a more nuanced understanding of refugee status and the removal of administrative barriers that undermine equitable access to urban resources.

There is also a pressing need for a reconceptualization of urban citizenship. Traditional models of assimilation often imply that refugees must entirely abandon their cultural identities to be accepted into the host society. However, many refugees maintain vibrant, self-sustaining networks rooted in their ethnic and regional identities. While these networks are invaluable, policy approaches should aim to create an “inclusive urban citizenship” that recognizes both the distinct cultural heritage of refugees and their potential contributions to the broader urban fabric. Such an approach would involve legal reforms that ease documentation requirements, as well as targeted support programs designed to integrate refugees into key urban sectors like education and housing (Sassen 2009). In addition to addressing legal hurdles, policymakers must actively work to dismantle the structural inequities embedded within self-settlement systems.

Some refugees are forced to navigate a labyrinth of documentation requirements just to secure basic shelter – a process that not only exacerbates their vulnerability but also reinforces existing patterns of urban inequality (Makhema 2009). Urban policies must explicitly include refugees in affordable housing schemes, recognizing that sustainable integration is only possible when all residents are granted the right to safe, secure housing.

Longstanding bureaucratic practices and socio-economic disparities continue to shape contemporary urban landscapes

There is a need for a comprehensive policy response that not only addresses immediate administrative shortcomings but also tackles the underlying inequities that perpetuate refugee exclusion. Meaningful change will require cross-sector collaboration between government agencies, local communities, and civil society organizations to create a more inclusive framework for urban integration (Portes 2001; Kenge 2017).

In conclusion, the integration of urban refugees hinges on robust non-economic rights that address housing, social protection, and educational access. Secondly, self-settlement systems must be fundamentally rethought to ensure that all refugees can attain inclusive urban citizenship. These insights, I believe, provide a clear roadmap for policymakers striving to develop more effective and humane strategies for refugee integration in urban centers. By bridging administrative gaps and

fostering inclusive policies, we can help transform urban spaces into environments where all residents—regardless of their origin—can thrive.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen non-economic rights frameworks for urban refugees

Policymakers must prioritize non-economic rights (such as affordable housing, social protection, and access to tertiary education), in their urban integration strategies for refugees. First, it is crucial to reform housing policies to remove administrative barriers that hinder refugees from accessing low-income housing. Policies should allow alternative forms of identification or documentation that reflect the realities of refugee mobility. This change would mitigate the discriminatory practices that force refugees into overcrowded or unregulated accommodations. Moreover, targeted housing programs that extend eligibility criteria to include refugees (irrespective of their permit type) would ensure that this vulnerable population is not side-lined from the benefits of urban development.

Second, policymakers need to design and implement comprehensive social protection schemes that account for the unique legal and bureaucratic challenges refugees face. Many refugees are caught in a bureaucratic limbo due to expired permits and a convoluted renewal process (Crush and Skinner 2017). Simplifying these procedures and creating an inclusive social safety net that does not solely depend on traditional

documentation would help stabilize refugees' lives and promote their long-term self-reliance.

Third, policymakers must expand access to tertiary education through measures such as subsidized tuition fees and streamlined admission processes that recognize asylum seeker documents. By doing so, refugees can gain the skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to the urban economy (UN HABITAT 2022).

Reimagine self-settlement systems toward inclusive urban citizenship

Policy makers must urgently rethink current self-settlement systems that often leave refugees marginalized. To create a more inclusive urban citizenship model, policymakers must expedite the refugee status processing timeline and thus reduce the time spent under the limited protections of an asylum seeker status (Section 22 permit).

Integrating formal support mechanisms with the informal networks that refugees already rely on is also essential. For example, establishing partnerships with ethnic and regional associations can serve as a bridge between refugees and state services. These collaborations can facilitate the dissemination of information on legal rights, education funding, and housing opportunities, thereby reinforcing community-based support systems (Tippens 2020). Furthermore, policy reforms should explicitly include refugees in urban

development plans, ensuring that the design and implementation of social programs are sensitive to their unique needs. This might involve creating special advisory committees that include refugee representatives, ensuring that policies are co-designed with input from those directly affected (Sassen 2009).

In summary, my recommendations call for a dual approach: first, reinforcing non-economic rights to provide refugees with secure housing, reliable social protection, and accessible education; and second, reconfiguring self-settlement systems to foster inclusive urban citizenship. These actionable steps not only address immediate policy gaps but also pave the way for a more equitable urban future where refugees can fully participate in and contribute to their communities.

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