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Contributors or competitors? Complexity and variability of refugees' economic 'impacts' within a Kenyan host community

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Abstract

Drawing upon in-depth qualitative research with refugees and host populations in Kenya, this article offers a diverging viewpoint towards refugees' economic impacts within a hosting area and sheds light on the complexity and variability of such impacts perceived by different members of a host community. Due to the unprecedented numbers of refugees worldwide, assessing the impacts of hosting refugees is currently a 'hot topic' in the international community. However, the primary complication for studies that attempt to measure economic impacts are the complex patterns of economic interactions that refugees have with host communities. This means that refugees' economic impacts may be viewed, experienced and distributed unequally amongst the members of receiving society. Through a case-study in Nairobi's outskirts, this article demonstrates different patterns of engagement between refugees and the local population in the context of a labour market, and reveals contrasting views towards refugees' economic impacts within the host community.

Keywords: Kenya; economic impact; host community; refugees.

Introduction

Assessing the impacts of hosting refugees is currently a 'hot topic' in the policy-arena of the global refugee regime. Although this is not a new issue in forced migration, the massive outflow of refugees from Syria and other states as well as the so-called 'European Refugee Crisis' have further ignited interest in this long-standing agenda. With the unprecedented numbers of refugees worldwide, governments and policy-makers have become increasingly concerned about costs, both economic and social, of hosting refugee and are seeking ways to calculate these perceived 'losses' in quantifiable ways.

Spurred by this renewed interest, over the past few years major national and international institutions, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the US Department of State, and World Bank, have funded and conducted large-scale studies to evaluate the economic impacts of refugees on host communities and/or countries. Reflecting this increased policy-side demand for research, there has been a corresponding increase in scholarly analysis of the economic impacts related to forced migration in recent years (for instance, Taylor *et al.* 2015; Esen & Binatli 2017; Turk & Garlick 2016; Ruiz & Vargas-Silva 2013; Baez 2011; Kirui & Mwaruvie 2012).

However, conceptualising and measuring refugee impacts is not without serious challenges (see Zetter *et al.* 2012; Omata & Weaver 2014). Questions of economic impact of refugees on host

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populations and states are typically framed as dichotomies of 'burden' versus 'benefit', leading to overly simplistic cost-benefit analyses for refugee hosting. The primary complication for studies that attempt to measure economic impacts are the complex patterns of economic interactions that refugees have with host communities. This means that refugees' economic impacts may be viewed, experienced and distributed unequally amongst the members of receiving community. This, in turn, not only obfuscates the traditional dichotomy of whether refugees represent a 'burden' or 'benefit' for hosts but also emphasises the importance of understanding 'the political economy of refugee-hosting' – who gains, who loses within a receiving society. Yet recognition of these nuances is rarely found in the existing impact literature, which primarily relies on quantitative methods.

Drawing upon in-depth qualitative research with both refugees and hosts in Kenya, this article offers a diverging viewpoint towards refugees' impacts within a hosting area and seeks to shed light on the complexity and variability of economic impacts perceived and experienced by different members of a host community. While measuring economic impact can be a meaningful agenda, this micro-case study highlights the elusiveness inherent in evaluation of economic impacts of refugees and questions the uncritical and extensive use of impact study approaches to forced migrants.

Methodology

Data for this article is drawn from fieldwork in Nairobi between February and June 2017. The focus of the study was to gather data on livelihood strategies employed by urban refugees and their interactions with local communities living in neighbouring areas. This paper is based on an event analysis of conflict between Congolese refugees and Kenyan host people in Kitengela - a suburb area of Nairobi. As later described, physical fighting between a Congolese refugee and his Kenyan neighbour in this town occurred in March 2017 led into a protest against refugees by Kenyan residents. Using this incident as a point of departure, I conducted qualitative research to look more deeply into the root cause of this clash and to understand how different members of Kenyan hosts in Kitengela reacted to this event.

Semi-structured and un-structured interviewing was my principal research method. During the fieldwork period, I conducted over thirty interviews with Kenyan host populations and Congolese refugees in Kitengela. In order to avoid the over-influence of specific groups in my data, I interviewed both refugees and Kenyan nationals from diverse social and economic backgrounds as well as different age groups and genders. In addition, I interviewed local government officials in Kitengela and other major refugee-hosting areas, as well as staff members of UNHCR and refugee-supporting NGOs in Nairobi. Following the principle of confidentiality, all names in this article have been anonymised.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section briefly summarises the key arguments and approaches within the existing literature on the economic impacts of refugees and elucidates some conceptual and methodological gaps. The following section provides an in-depth analysis of recent tension between refugees and Kenyan hosts in Kitengela and highlights the variability in perceptions and experiences of host community members towards Congolese refugee neighbours. The final sections offer some additional insights and conclude with cautionary implications regarding the recent surge of impact studies in forced migration.

Literature on refugees' economic impacts on host 'communities'

In the field of forced migration, the economic impact of refugees on receiving populations and states has been a key policy topic for at least several decades. In the early 1980s, *International*



Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa sought to draw attention to the burdens suffered by refugee-hosting states and their populations as a major issue in humanitarian assistance (Betts 2004). Over the following decades, concern about the socio-economic impacts of hosting refugees remained salient. UNHCR Executive Committee from the late 1990s through early 2000s published a series of reports on the economic and social impacts hosting countries face in accommodating massive refugee populations (Omata & Weaver 2014). More recently, in 2011, the World Bank produced a two-volume literature review and methodological framework called *Assessing the Impacts & Costs of Forced Displacement* that focuses on understanding impacts for displaced populations as well as hosting populations and states. The topic has also been engaged with by a number of researchers (for instance, Alix-Garcia & Saah 2009; Whitaker 2002; Czaika 2005; Jacobsen 1997 & 2002; Kirui & Mwaruvie 2012; Landau 2003).

Despite decades of research, nevertheless, existing findings relating to refugees' economic impacts are inconclusive and highly dependent on contexts. This is in part due to methodological challenges in measuring impacts, and in part due to the number of confounding variables that make causal attribution of impacts to refugees extremely difficult. In particular, refugees' impacts on labour markets in host economy remains contested and debatable (see Whitaker 2002; Maystadt & Verwimp 2014; Alix-Garcia & Saah 2009; Sood & Seferis 2014).

At a micro-economic level, refugees can have a redistributive effect that creates 'winners and losers' within host populations through their participation in labour markets (Zetter *et al.* 2012). From the earlier literature (Chambers 1986) to recent reports (Zetter *et al.* 2014) it has been suggested that the poorest or most vulnerable within a given community are at the highest risk of being negatively impacted by the presence of refugees. Alternatively, private landowners or business owners may be able to benefit from cheap refugee labour, and also have the capital to make opportunistic investments to benefit from increased demand amongst the population.

In considering the refugees' labour impacts on receiving sides, as Czaika (2005) warns, it would be naïve not to take into respect the heterogeneous composition of host societies. The literature often represents the people living around a refugee-hosting area or a refugee camp as a 'host community', which implies shared values, shared interests, and shared purposes amongst members in the locality (see Strang & Ager 2010). Nevertheless, local hosts should rather be viewed as highly stratified societies like any other, divided along lines of livelihood, education, material wealth, and identity (Rodgers 2017). If attention is not paid to this diversity and heterogeneity, then use of the term 'host community' could risk obscuring divergent and even conflicting economic interests amongst locals due to their livelihoods and socio-economic status.

As made apparent in the following sections, in Kitengela, differing perspectives towards refugees' economic impacts were often irreconcilable and largely formulated depending on the economic positions of local Kenyans as well as their individual relationships with refugees.

Kitengela case study: refugee as competitors or contributors?

Congolese and local hosts in Nairobi

Kenya currently hosts about 490,000 refugees, making it the 10th largest refugee-hosting country in the world (UNHCR 2017). Refugees in Kenya are concentrated in three main locations: Dadaab camp, Kakuma camp, and the capital city of Nairobi. Despite the country's encampment policy, Nairobi hosts about 67,000 refugees. By moving to the city, refugees give up almost all access to humanitarian assistance although they also tend to gain access to better social services such as schooling and hospitals.



The largest refugee population in Nairobi are the 30,000 Somali refugees who are concentrated in the well-known Eastleigh district where a large population of 'ethnic Somali' Kenyans offer Somali refugees an opportunity for partial assimilation (see Lindley 2011). In addition, and especially in recent years, the number of Congolese refugees in Nairobi has been increasing, reaching almost 20,000 in 2017. In contrast to Somali refugees, they are scattered throughout different neighbourhoods in the capital city.

The nature of relationships between Congolese refugees and their neighbouring Kenyan hosts is quite different from those of Somali refugees, primarily because Congolese refugees do not have ethnic counterparts in Kenya in the ways that Somali refugees do. However, Congolese refugees take advantage of their command of Swahili – Kenya's national language – and their common religious affinity as well as their closer physical resemblance to Kenyan hosts to eke out their survival in the urban landscape.

Through our research we found that most Congolese refugees in Nairobi find informal employment with Kenyan business owners, with a concentration of those employed in private security companies, retail shops and restaurants. As Congolese refugees are often willing to accept a lower level of payment compared to Kenyan nationals, Kenyan business owners may prefer to hire refugees over Kenyan casual labourers. As would be expected, Congolese refugee employees in these informal sectors were not necessarily satisfied with their lower salary but did not have alternatives given the additional difficulties of finding gainful work without formal registration procedures and legal documents, which most refugees in Nairobi do not possess and cannot obtain.

Kitengela incident: mounting hostility towards refugees

Kitengela is a town in the outskirts of southern Nairobi, with about 50,000 people according to a Kenyan government official. It is said to be one of the fastest growing cities in Kenya due to its relatively cheaper rent, increasing labour demand, and proximity to Nairobi's centre – as often dubbed a 'bedroom of Nairobi'.

Due to prospective economic opportunities and cheaper living costs, Kitengela has also been increasingly a popular destination for Congolese refugees in Nairobi in recent years. According to informal data gathered by the official representative body of Congolese refugees, as of 2017, more than 2,000 Congolese refugees live there, the vast majority making a living as casual labourers in informal sectors. Common types of employment typically include barbers, watchmen, waiters/waitress, shopkeepers, and porters.

According to our informants, Congolese refugees in Kitengela had been able to build a generally peaceful relationship with local hosts. A local government official in Kitengela explained: 'Around 2013, we started seeing a big increase in number of [Congolese] refugees. Overall, locals and refugees have been living peacefully.'

However, due to the increasing presence of refugees in local business sectors, the level of tolerance and generosity towards Congolese refugees has reportedly been reduced in Kitengela. According to informants, some Kenyan neighbours have started viewing refugees as 'competitors' for job opportunities. This mounting tension between Congolese refugees and Kenyan locals manifested itself in an inter-community conflict in March 2017. According to local media sources and government officials, a personal conflict between a Congolese refugee and his Kenyan friend occurred at a local bar in Kitengela, resulting in the refugee stabbing the Kenyan's leg with a knife (see Ngunjiri 2017). The Congolese refugee was then arrested by the police and charged.



Despite the seemingly personal nature of the incident, following this conflict some groups of Kenyans in Kitengela started organising protests against the Congolese refugee community living there. As news spread and gained more support in the suburb, angry Kenyan mobs gathered and attempted to torch a church frequented by members of the Congolese community in the area. Notwithstanding the interventions by the police and local government, these Kenyan residents called for the eviction of Congolese refugees from Kitengela (see Ngunjiri 2017 for details).

In my interviews, both Congolese refugees and Kenyan nationals admitted that there has been an underlying tension between refugees and hosts around the growing presence of refugees, as the following comment of senior local government official in Kitengela indicates:

'For last few years, the presence of Congolese refugees has been growing [in Kitengela] ...Some Kenyans feel like they are invading local labour markets. This has been a source of frustration amongst some members of local community...When media came in [after the news of Congolese stabbing a Kenyan], people who have nothing to do with this personal fight started showing hostility against Congolese refugees and organised mobs to throw out refugees.'

Congolese refugees in Kitengela were certainly aware of this mounting hostility towards them. During a focus group discussion, one of the Congolese participants voiced: 'In general, we lived in peaceful harmony. But recently our relationship has been getting worse. Some locals don't like us.' With the growing presence of refugees in Kitengela, local Kenyans have started perceiving refugees as competitors in labour markets. Such perceptions, nevertheless, significantly differ depending on the nature of relationship with refugees in labour markets.

Diverging views towards refugees amongst Kenyan hosts

Kenyan casual labours were a centrepiece of protests against refugees in Kitengela. Joseph, a 42-year old Kenyan elder member born in Kitengela, was involved in mitigating this conflict and observed these protests closely. In an interview, he described the nature of this conflict in detail, explaining:

'Most of these protestors were Kenyan manual workers who also engaged in lower paid jobs such as hawkers, security guards, and factory workers. They have no special skills and only limited levels of education. They claimed the number of Congolese refugees has become too big in Kitengela and were taking away their jobs.'

Having previously worked as a factory worker in Kitengela, Joseph shared his sympathy with these Kenyan protesters, even though he did not directly participate in the demonstrations:

'I understand the claims of the protestors. Initially we thought the refugees are seeking temporary refuge in Kenya and soon returning to their home. Also their number was small. But they are not returning to Congo. Instead more and more are being settled in Kitengela. Now they are competitors for us.'



Congolese refugees also admitted that the increasing number of Congolese refugees entering the informal sectors of the Kitengela economy has intensified job competition with locals in some areas. A representative of Congolese refugee community in Kitengela stated:

'Job competition [with locals] exists. We [Congolese refugees] accept cheaper employment because we have no alternative to pursue...And now this frustration has burst into this conflict. Personal fighting was just a trigger...Even before this fight in March, a member of county assembly in Kitengela was saying "I will throw out Congolese from this area".'

On the other hand, some Kenyan business owners in Kitengela showed an opposing view. For these Kenyan business owners, especially those who directly employ Congolese refugees, they are a source of cheap labour. Alex, a Kenyan Mpesa and phone selling shop owner in Kitengela since 2002, strongly sided with refugees and dismissed the claim of Kenyan protestors as 'nonsense':

Interviewer: How many people do you hire at your shop?

Alex: Total 7 staff. 3 refugees and 4 Kenyans. These refugees have been working at my place since 2016.

Interviewer: Do you prefer refugees to Kenyans?

Alex: Yes, definitely. I fired some Kenyans and replaced with refugees. These locals stole money from the shop. Refugees are much more honest and reliable.

Interviewer: Have you heard of Kenyans' protest against refugees?

Alex: Yes but Kenyan protestors made no sense to me. Simply Congolese refugees are better workers and they deserve employment.

When I asked Alex whether he thinks refugees are taking away Kenyan jobs or not, he emphatically responded to me as below:

'No, Congolese refugees are not taking jobs away by force. It should be a choice of employer. The employers should be able to decide who to hire. This is business, not charity...If refugees disappear from here, many of our businesses will be damaged. They are not only a source of employment but they also bring other Congolese refugees as customers.'

Alex's view has been largely echoed by other Kenyan business owners who are not employing refugees in their enterprises. Mary is one of the executive board members of the Kitengela market – the largest market in the area - and sells vegetable and fruits at her stall in the market. While she has never hired refugees, she shared the view of Alex and criticised Kenyan casual labourers harshly:

'I don't think Congolese refugees are invading our labour markets. They [Congolese refugees] are filling in jobs which locals don't want to take...Many Kenyans [casual labour] are not serious so that they are kicked out of jobs. That is their fault. They should not blame refugees for their own problems.'



It also seemed apparent that some of the sensitivity and frictions stirring in March 2017 between refugees and national casual labours in Kitengela was amplified by the upcoming August 2017 election in Kenya. Perceived tensions between refugees and migrants were reinforced by political leaders who wanted to benefit from a strict stance towards unwanted arrivals. According to a staff member of refugee-supporting NGO in Nairobi, one local candidate tried to use this incident as part of his political campaign that promised to evict Congolese refugees from Kitengela - although his claim did not necessarily obtain widespread support from host populations.

Interestingly, many of Congolese refugees were critical of their fellow refugee who stabbed his Kenyan friend, and accused him of putting them all in danger of worsening relationships with their neighbours. Speaking about the incident, the representative of Congolese refugee community in Kitengela commented:

'This Congolese man [who made this conflict] was blamed internally by other Congolese refugees in Kitengela. Evidently, this was a misbehaviour...Now the election is approaching. [After this incident] We have been warning others that we need to be very careful about our behaviour to avoid any conflict with locals.'

This sort of community censorship indicates the degree to which Congolese refugees are aware of their precarious economic position in Nairobi, which is largely contingent on the maintenance of good relationships with host nationals. Aware of this, Congolese refugees in Kitengela expressed concerns that some Kenyan employers may become more cautious about hiring Congolese refugees in the future.

Lessons from the study

This case study from Nairobi offers some important lessons for thinking about economic impacts of refugees on host communities. First, this case re-emphasises the complexity of refugee-host economic relationships. Refugees' economic lives are indeed embedded in wider political economy of Kitengela. The poorest or most unskilled members within a host population are placed at direct competition with refugees and are thus more likely to see refugees negatively. Meanwhile, private business owners can considerably benefit from cheaper refugee labour. Even within the same locality, depending on the relationship with hosts, refugees are contrastively perceived as either 'contributors' or 'competitors'.

Second, these contrastive views towards Congolese refugee labourers within the host people were almost entirely based upon subjective perceptions and anecdotal encounters. Neither the Kenyan employers nor the manual labourers referenced specific evidence for broader positive or negative 'impacts' of hosting refugees in Kitengela – and indeed such rigorous quantitative evidence does not exist – but this did not hinder them from expressing strong convictions on the subject. Ultimately, what mattered the most is that the poorer and unskilled Kenyan labours 'believed' that they were negatively affected by the presence of refugees, and similarly, local business owners 'assumed' that they benefited from refugee workforce. This, in turn, poses a question: to what degree do 'actual' economic impacts – meaning those which are quantitatively measurable – matter for refugee-host relationships, especially compared to the role of popular opinions and entrenched narratives at the local level?

Third, the findings above invite us to reconsider heterogeneity within host populations. While the concept of 'host community' implies shared values and common interests amongst members,



the residents in Kitengela are varied and divided along lines of social and economic status. Therefore, a key question to ask in any impact study in forced migration is 'impact on whom'. In most existing studies, this is usually divided into two groups - refugees or host community - but it is necessary to ask deeper questions in order to understand the variety and types of impacts that exist in order to present a detailed picture of what is happening.

Fourth, given the significant heterogeneity, the question of whose voice is to be heard or reflected in research is a critical methodological issue. As illustrated in this article, there are multiple 'truths' and 'realities' on the ground. In order to address this, any research on economic impact requires an in-depth and detailed contextual understanding that enables the research to methodologically think through how varied impacts of refugees on different members of a host population will be captured and portrayed. In particular, if policy-makers or aid organisations intend to create effective interventions to mitigate the impact of hosting refugees, this understanding is indispensable.

Finally, without a clear understanding of the existing political economy in host societies, the economic impacts debate of refugees versus hosts can be easily manipulated and politicised by anyone or any groups with specific interests. The technique of 'othering' can be used to promote harmful political agendas – most typically, the rhetoric employed by anti-immigration movements that portray 'refugees-as-burdens'. Communicating the economic impact of hosting refugees as a net 'gain' or 'loss' obscures the complexity of a multitude of benefits and costs that can be experienced by different individuals or groups in a host population.

Conclusions

Drawing upon a micro case-study in Nairobi's outskirts, this article has demonstrated different patterns of engagement between refugees and the local Kenyan population in the context of a labour market, and revealed contrasting views towards refugees' economic impacts amongst the host community. Given the variability and multitude of relationships between refugees and hosts, whether or not refugees are viewed as 'contributors' or 'competitors' is largely subject to each individual's position in a host community.

Due to the significant number of forced migrants globally, research that looks at economic impacts of refugees on local communities has had increasing policy relevance in recent years. In assessing positive and negative impacts, it is tempting to clearly demarcate the refugee presence as one of either burden or benefit. Yet this is not only a methodologically difficult task but also is at risk of failing to capture political economy embedded in a refugee-receiving society.

Given the diversity within host populations, any studies on refugee impacts necessitate an understanding of internal divisions and complicated incentive structures at play. In order to accomplish this, we should revisit the role of qualitative methods and ethnographic approaches as a complement and foundation for quantitatively-focused studies. Such attempts could yield useful insights for practitioners and policy-makers, and consequently help to facilitate a deeper and nuanced understanding of the economic impacts that refugees can have for host populations.

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