

EDITED BY
LUCAS OESCH
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REFUGEE RECEPTION AND CAMPS

LOCAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

GLOBAL MIGRATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE



REFUGEE RECEPTION AND CAMPS

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Local and Global Perspectives

Edited by
Lucas Oesch and Léa Lemaire



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To Razan, Victor and Kiana

Lucas Oesch

To Iván and Romeo

Léa Lemaire

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Series Editors' Preface

Alexandra Délano Alonso and Nando Sigona

Changes in refugee flows across the world in the last decade have largely been met with increasingly restrictive forms of refugee reception by governments in the Global North and South. This includes different forms of containment in camps and other infrastructures that often replicate carceral and punitive systems, while supportive forms of refugee reception and integration have narrowed in scope. This edited volume examines different cases around the world to explore the intersections and dynamics of local spaces of refugee reception in relation to global systems, demonstrating how refugee camps and accommodation spaces are embedded in and shaped by the interplay between local everyday realities and global processes. Through a wide range of cases from Jordan, Uganda, India, Costa Rica, Lebanon and Kenya, to Greece, Serbia, France, Germany, Australia, Luxembourg, the United States and the United Kingdom, the authors examine the logics and operations of refugee camps in local settings in relation to global dynamics that include international refugee policy and governance, as well as national and international economic processes and networks. By bringing together case studies from different displacement contexts across the world and through mobilizing different levels of analysis, this collection offers a comprehensive and original overview of the geography of camps and the geopolitical dynamics that connect them.

Each chapter in this book offers a deep understanding of the local dimensions of the processes of refugee reception and how camps – with an expansive definition that includes tents, containers, shelters, barracks, hotels, informal settlements, detention centres, safe houses and social housing – are connected to their local environments, including the towns or cities where they are located or that they are close to. These local dynamics are revealed not just through interactions with government agencies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations but also through other actors that are not traditionally thought of as being involved in refugee reception, like supermarket owners and local retailers. The various case

studies also offer different methodologies and approaches to the study of camps and refugee reception centres, including interviews, focus groups and ethnography, but also longitudinal and historical analyses, and mapping.

This collective interdisciplinary analysis contributes to rethinking refugee reception and camps beyond the Global North/South divide. It invites readers to examine refugee camps beyond the regional fragmentation of research and challenges the idea of camps as deterritorialized spatial containers detached from their local surroundings. It offers novel insights into how the local is relationally produced in connection to global processes that are constantly changing. The local is not envisioned here as a given or as territorially fixed; it is not considered a bounded space or a level of government but rather as an ordinary place, shaped by daily negotiations with a multitude of actors, materials, built environments and infrastructures, which are relationally imbricated and co-constituted with global dynamics.

Readers will find in this book a collection of innovative, theoretically insightful and empirically grounded case studies from across the world that makes an important contribution to academic thinking on camp governance and refugee reception and also to current policy and practice that can be improved through a more nuanced understanding of the relations between camps and their local surroundings and the imbrication of local and global dynamics made present in these spaces.

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Introduction: A Local and Global Perspective on Refugee Reception and Camps

Lucas Oesch and Léa Lemaire

Establishing a global dialogue

On 5 May 2019, a few months after the start of our REFUGOV research project on refugee camps in Jordan and reception centres for asylum seekers in Luxembourg,¹ we had a meeting with the head of the Migrants and Refugees Service (Service migrations et réfugiés) at the Luxembourg Red Cross. In the discussion, he advised us to open up our research into a reception centre located in a small town in western Luxembourg. The centre falls under the responsibility of the central state agency in charge of refugee reception in Luxembourg, the National Reception Agency (Office national de l'accueil – ONA), and the daily management and provision of care is undertaken by the Red Cross. He explained that the ONA had introduced a pilot project. Residents of the reception centre had been provided with a debit card, to which their monthly allowance was transferred, in place of the vouchers they would normally have received, which would have given them access to a mobile grocery store truck that stopped regularly in front of the centre. This new project had been set up with the support of a local supermarket chain that has a store in the town; beneficiaries can use their card with this chain. He went on to tell us that, in this regard, Luxembourg was quite far behind with its vouchers and even the debit card, as he knew that, for example, in refugee camps in Jordan, residents were able to do their shopping in supermarkets located within the camps and contracted by the World Food Programme to local retailers, using an iris-scan system on which their allowance was recorded through blockchain technology.

This discussion exemplifies the rationale behind this edited collection. By referring to the example of the different payment methods used in camps in very varied settings across the world (in Luxembourg and Jordan, for example), the head of the Service migrations et réfugiés at the Luxembourg Red Cross drew our attention to the global dimension of refugee reception processes. At the same time, the discussion pointed to the local dimension of the process, and to how camps are not deterritorialized realities but spaces connected to their local environments. A multiplicity of actors takes part in the reception process, not only central state agencies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) but also other actors that are locally anchored and not traditionally thought of as being involved in refugee reception, like supermarket owners and local retailers. Furthermore, besides covering the various ways in which camps are connected to the towns or cities in which, or close to which, they are located, the discussion also emphasized the variety of care provision and services available in them, for example from central state agencies, international organizations or NGOs and the diversity of methods used in ensuring livelihoods – such as vouchers, debit cards and iris-based technologies – and, last but not least, highlighted how camps are economically related to their surroundings, for instance with respect to the purchase of food and goods.

By focusing on similar aspects to the ones just mentioned, the contributions to this edited collection aim to rethink refugee reception and camps beyond the global North/South divide. More specifically, we focus on the production of refugee reception and camps by looking across the world at the imbrication of local and global dynamics in the governance of them. We (re-)place camps in their local environments while at the same time taking account of the fact that the local is relationally constituted by, and constitutes, global flows, networks and connections in refugee reception and camp governance processes.

Throughout the world, people on the move are often accommodated in designated facilities, referred to as refugee camps or reception centres (see, for example, [Knudsen and Berg, 2023](#)). These facilities have been generically conceptualized by scholars as ‘camps’ across the disciplines of sociology, geography, anthropology, political science and architecture ([Diken and Lausten, 2005](#); [Hailey, 2009](#); [Agier, 2011, 2014](#); [Katz et al, 2018](#); [Scott-Smith and Breeze, 2020](#)). The camp is a globalizing spatio-political technology used to accommodate certain categories of populations ([Katz et al, 2018](#); [Carter-White and Minca, 2025](#)). The camp is especially used for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees. Camps are supposedly spatially and temporarily bounded. They have limits or borders and are often only meant to exist for a limited duration. However, in practice, spatial and temporal boundaries are often crossed ([Turner, 2016](#)). A portion of research in the fields of camp studies and refugee reception has tended to consider camps

as deterritorialized spatial containers detached from their local surroundings (Agier, 2011, 2014). Another portion has focused on considering camps and reception processes in relation to their wider local and global contexts (Katz et al, 2018; Pasquetti and Sanyal, 2020). However, studying the imbrication of local and global dynamics in the production of camps and reception processes across various case studies around the world has up to now not yet constituted the explicit aim of a collective endeavour. That kind of effort is needed in order to overcome the fragmentation between research addressing the ‘local turn’ in camps and refugee reception in the Global North on the one hand and the Global South on the other. Camps can embody various spatial and material forms, one common instantiation being lines of tents, containers or shelters. However, the collection emphasizes the heterogeneity of camps and adopts the necessary expanded focus by additionally reflecting on alternative spatial frames such as hotels, informal settlements, detention centres, safe houses, social housing and even neighbourhoods.

The collection also emphasizes the heterogeneity of refugee reception. A common definition of refugee reception is ‘the liminal period covering the initial phase in a new (host) country starting from arrival and application for asylum to the final decision about this application’ (Kaya and Nagel, 2021: 227). However, this definition does not reflect the various situations that this book will display. Reception is often not a linear process necessarily leading to the granting or refusal of a particular protection or migration status. The contributions to this book thus move away from a legal or policy-oriented understanding of reception. Reception should rather be ‘understood as a process’ (Maple, 2024: 3). It refers to the diverse ‘forms of welcome and protection offered to persons seeking refuge’ (Maple, 2024: 21). By considering reception as a process, the authors of this collection avoid a conceptualization of reception as ephemeral, corresponding only to ‘a mere moment in time, such as the crossing of a border or gaining status via registration procedures’ (Maple, 2024: 25). They all recognize that ‘the period of reception has gradually become extended in a way that has created limbo situations in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers’ (Kaya and Nagel, 2021: 227). The chapters of this collection show how the local anchoring of reception complexifies the understanding of the global process of refugee reception, as well as its temporality. Understanding reception as a process also allows for a reflection on ‘the multi-directional and multi-locational dynamics of contemporary refugee arrival’ (Maple, 2024: 3). Refugee populations can circulate between camps and cities, as will be shown in this volume with the case of Uganda. This also means that reception is not always the point of arrival and where displacement effectively end, since forced migration movements can be circular or sporadic and unpredictable. Nevertheless, despite the wide variety of reception processes and sites the book highlights through their localized manifestations, the contributions also

emphasize a global trend: that of the encampment of reception throughout the world (Agier, 2014).

Since the start of the 21st century, scholars in camp studies (for example Bochmann, 2019), as well as in refugee and migration studies (for example Zapata-Barrero et al, 2017; Schmiz and Rächle, 2019; van Breugel, 2020), have increasingly directed their attention to ‘the local’. However, in some of this work, ‘the local’ is used as if it were equivalent to ‘the city’. There has been a tendency to apprehend the local as a level of government distinct from national, regional or international levels (for example Caponio et al, 2019). Other works have claimed to ‘take the local seriously’ and to envision it as open and relationally produced in connection to global processes rather than bounded and static (Darling, 2009; Hinger et al, 2016; Novak, 2025).

Although ‘serious’ attention to the local is now an important feature of this literature, research on the local production of refugee reception and camps remains fragmented between the Global South and North. Research in/on the Global South has mainly focused on refugee camps and urban refugees and issues of urban informality, the politicization of camp space and livelihoods (Fabos and Kibreab, 2007; Sanyal, 2014; Darling, 2017). Research in/on the Global North has mostly focused on reception and detention centres and issues such as dispersal policies, sanctuary cities and the role of local authorities (Darling, 2010, 2011, 2017; Mountz, 2011; Doomernik and Glorius, 2016; Glorius and Doomernik, 2020).

This edited collection overcomes this sectoral and geographical divide in research and establishes a missing global dialogue in the study of refugee reception and camps. Our approach allows the specificities involved in the local production of reception and camps across the world to be highlighted, as well as their shared features and global relations. In this way, the collection rethinks established research trends in refugee reception and camp governance and brings out emerging ones.

To do this, the contributions to the book question the local production of camps and reception in highly diverse settings across the Global North and South. Case studies are based on various methodologies and approaches involving interviews, focus groups and ethnography but also longitudinal and historical analyses, as well as mapping. They also range from the United Kingdom to Costa Rica, France to India, Germany to Serbia, Australia to Uganda, Luxembourg to Jordan, Austria to Kenya, and Lebanon to the United States and Greece.

While focusing on the local, the contributors to this edited collection avoid the fallacy of territorial fixing (Allen and Cochrane, 2007). The different chapters do not envision the local as a given: it is not a bounded space or a level of government. They show how local and global dynamics are always relationally imbricated and co-constitutive processes (Massey, 2005). Indeed, by analysing the local production of camps and reception, the contributions

highlight the fact that, across the world, the local is not limited to the actions of municipal authorities or local governments (although they remain an important feature of it, as this book will show). Rather, they demonstrate that these local and global dynamics imply negotiations between a multitude of actors who are involved in the governance of camps and reception, ranging, for example, from international organizations, central governments, municipalities and NGOs to the army, solidarity movements, transnational firms, local private companies and individuals. Moreover, the attention paid to local processes makes it possible to shed light on the role of specific actors who often remain in the shadows when it comes to the governance of camps and reception, either because they do not have an official role in camp management and reception or because their role has been overlooked by research. So, food providers, housing companies, locally based traders and other entrepreneurs, for instance in the tourism industry, are not officially in charge of the management of refugee reception and camps. Therefore, their role in this regard had so far received little attention from scholars. This collection fills that gap.

Furthermore, in a departure from the exceptionality that has long been attached to conceptualizations of the camp (Agamben, 1998), all the contributions to the book approach it more as an ordinary place (Achilli and Oesch, 2016) by focusing on the daily negotiations involving a multitude of actors related to the organization and management of camps and their surroundings. Indeed, it is through the study of the imbrications of the local and the global that the everyday realities of reception and of camps in relation to their surroundings can be understood and analysed. Furthermore, the contributions are also attentive to the fact that the negotiations between this multiplicity of actors produce constantly changing structures of refugee reception and camp governance (Hinger et al, 2016: 442). Attention is therefore paid to the temporalities of reception processes and camps (Papoutsi, 2021; Gatter, 2023), with some of the latter, such as Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East, having already existed for several decades. Camp residents can thus live a form of endless reception in permanent temporary spaces (Oesch, 2019). In addition, the contributions are also alive to the fact that reception and camp governance processes involve ‘more-than-human’ trajectories as well. There are consequently chapters focusing not only on actors but also on the materiality and built environment of refugee reception and camps, for instance on their infrastructure.

This publication develops a new interdisciplinary scholarship in migration studies, and more specifically in the fields of refugee reception and camp governance, that is at one and the same time innovative and theoretically insightful through its focus on the imbrication of local and global dynamics while being empirically grounded in case studies from across the world. It aims to challenge not only academic thinking on camp governance and

refugee reception but also current policy and practice, which still tends to neglect the relations between camps and their local surroundings and the aforementioned imbrication of local and global dynamics. While the main focus of this collection is on actors intervening in the governance of reception and camps, the chapters are also sensible to the perspectives of camp residents who also contribute to shape reception processes and camps (see also Ramadan, 2013; Sigona, 2015; Krause, 2021; Papoutsi, 2021; Dalal, 2022; Katz, 2022; AbouAssi et al, 2024). Throughout the collection, camp residents will mainly be referred to as asylum seekers, refugees or migrants. Our aim is, however, not to reproduce the categories of the migration apparatus (Dahinden, 2016), and the varied understanding of such categories by the authors of the chapters have to be interpreted in this way.

Rethinking research trends on the ‘local’

The volume starts with a chapter by Jonathan Darling which delves further into the conceptual foundations of ‘the local’ that underlie the conceptual framework of this book. Based on empirical material such as interviews and discursive analyses of the press, he examines the case of Napier barracks in South East England as a site of refugee reception in order to explore the intersections between refugee reception and discussions of the ‘local’ dynamics of asylum. He draws out the relational connections between policy, practice and discourse that extend beyond the ‘local’ battleground of Napier barracks in order to position such battlegrounds in relation to a global regime of refugee reception. In particular, he develops a critical account of how discussions of refugee reception might engage with, and extend beyond, the possibilities and limits of a ‘local’ account of asylum policy and politics.

Subsequent chapters rethink established research trends in camp and refugee studies, that is, the relations between camps and cities on the one hand and consideration of camps as sites of care on the other, besides revealing an emerging trend, that of considering camps as means of economic development. Furthermore, these three research trends and the respective contributions to the book are highly interconnected. Relations between camps and cities can, for example, be economic, urban actors can contribute to the care of camp residents and the provision of care can also be economically driven.

Camps and their relations with cities

Research on migration and cities has for a long time underlined the global dimension of how migration transforms local urban space (Sassen, 1991; Lejeune et al, 2021). The relations between camps and cities have already been explored in camp and refugee studies, with an eye to the city being

recreated in the camp (Agier, 2002; Dorai, 2010), including enquiries into the urbanism of camps (Jansen, 2019; Al-Shoubaki, 2022), the camp spilling over into the city (Abourahme, 2015; Martin, 2015; Nettelblatt and Boano, 2019) and the camp representing a borderscape within the city (Fontanari, 2015). These contributions, however, rarely go beyond a regional, or Global South/Global North perspective. In this book, the contributions to this section revisit this trend by exploring, in a variety of contexts across the world, how the management of camps and refugee reception involves a multitude of urban actors, including municipal and local authorities but also, for example, popular committees, middlemen and volunteers who contribute to create flows and relations between camps and cities.

Nora Stel's chapter deals with the case of Lebanon and focuses on informal settlements, understood as campscapes, where Palestinian and Syrian refugees live. It is based on extremely rich qualitative fieldwork involving semi-structured interviews, informal meetings, ethnographic work and focus groups. She argues that the informal nature of these campscapes enables and legitimizes the securitized stance that various local Lebanese state authorities have adopted towards refugee representatives. According to her, the informality of refugee spaces is an instrument of governance. She shows how 'the local' is a crucial element of this informalization. Until now, analyses adopting a national perspective have opposed the way in which Lebanon has governed the displacement of Palestinians on the one hand – with a classic United Nations encampment – to its governance of displaced Syrians – with a rigorous no-camp policy. The local approach developed by Stel, by contrast, highlights the continuities that exist in the way Lebanon governs the Palestinian and Syrian populations, notably through a process of spatial informalization.

The chapter by Léa Lemaire and Lucas Oesch focuses on the reception of refugees in Jordan and Luxembourg through a relational perspective. In continuity with the work of Doreen Massey (2005) on the relational approach to space, they question the relations between camps and cities. They seek to put into perspective the local approach across the Global South and North by focusing on the Azraq refugee camp and town in Jordan and the Diekirch reception centre and town in Luxembourg, which they use as their case studies. Their research is based on qualitative fieldwork during which they conducted interviews with staff of international, non-governmental and community-based organizations, international donors and national and local officials in Jordan as well as interviews with NGO and municipal employees, national civil servants and a local elected official in Luxembourg between 2019 and 2021. They argue that, in both cases, municipal authorities are contributing to the building of a network of relations and a geography of responsibility between the camp and the city that affects the transformation of both.

In his chapter, Ankur Datta discusses the local turn with regard to camps in South Asia, more specifically those located in India. On the one hand, he analyses the historical development of camps in India following partition at the end of British rule, basing his analysis on existing literature; on the other, he studies the everyday life of camps in Jammu and Kashmir in the 2000s based on an ethnographic methodology. His essay relates migration studies with inequalities studies and urban studies. He shows that the local turn offers interesting prospects for research in the Global South. Although in the Global North the local turn has mainly focused on urban governance and the integration of refugees in a context of anxieties about migration, in the Global South it has highlighted tensions between refugee camps and settlements, between the ordinary and the exceptional, between temporariness and permanence. He also demonstrates how camps in the Global South can become parts of cities but also how they can be dismantled, which embodies the exercise of state power over camp residents.

Melora Koepke uses the Centre de premier accueil (CPA), a camp-like structure situated not in the peripheries of the global or urban landscape but inside Paris, as the focus of her chapter, which is based on ethnographic fieldwork in and around the CPA as well as interviews with municipal actors, employees, volunteers and migrants. Following a Foucauldian approach, she considers the CPA as a municipal *dispositif* created to manage the ‘undesirables’ and the ‘migration crisis’ in Paris. She shows that in reality the *dispositif* works to shape and produce the very conditions of ‘crisis’ it was ostensibly created to manage and govern. Her contribution to the local turn lies in her critical perspective on humanitarian municipalism. By studying the migration crisis as an urban crisis, she points out how municipal authorities strategically position themselves as actors in migration management vis-à-vis the central state.

Camps and the provision of care

As with camps and cities, scholarly attention has been paid to camps as sites of ‘care and control’ over many years in the fields of refugee reception and camp studies (Malkki, 1992). Following a critical humanitarianism perspective (Fassin, 2012), researchers have focused in particular on the ambiguous role played by employees of NGOs and international organizations in camps (Agier, 2011). The contributions to this section of the book revisit this trend by highlighting how, across various case studies, the welfare subjectivities of camp residents have been produced through negotiations involving a multitude of actors – not only those intervening directly within the camps but also many with whom residents interact elsewhere, for instance in safe houses, on military bases or on journeys into and out of camps (taxi drivers and smugglers, for example). The chapters focus on the role of NGOs and

other organizations, which remains central. However, they also highlight the involvement of other actors such as veterans and hotel owners, who live on the margins of the camps, but who can ultimately have a crucial influence on the living conditions of their residents.

Elena Reichl and Nanneke Winters study a reception centre in Golfito, Costa Rica, focusing on the interactions between the staff at the centre, the inhabitants of Golfito and the African, Asian and Caribbean migrants in transit. The empirical part of their research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Golfito and the adjacent border town of Paso Canoas, in Panama. Their chapter is situated in the literature that considers camps in relation to their surroundings. By taking on a case with a rural setting in the Global South, their research goes beyond the European bias of the local turn. Focusing mainly on urban and multi-level governance, it highlights the local embeddedness of migrant reception through *more-than-local* stories, that is, ones that can be traced locally but at the same time integrate cross-border, regional and global dynamics. Beyond the traditional dialectic between care and control that the literature on migrant reception has already pointed out, they show that relationships between migrants and staff can also be marked by informality, curiosity or rivalry.

The chapter by Jessica Collins-Bojovic and Claudio Minca focuses on camps and safe houses for unaccompanied child refugees in Serbia. Their research is based on grey literature as well as on interviews they conducted with local civil society organizations working with unaccompanied children. They combine camp studies produced within the discipline of geography with literature that has engaged with the accommodation and care of unaccompanied children in different fields such as social work and child welfare, the local governance of asylum seekers and refugees and the Balkan Route as a pathway for immigrants into Europe. They examine the role of 'the local' in shaping the reception and care of unaccompanied children in Serbia. They highlight the role of various local actors such as social workers, civil society employees and even smugglers. They argue that local governance is not only a scale of policy *implementation*; it also has to be understood as an independent level of policy *development*. Their research shows the importance of studying the local governance of refugee children and how this dimension is crucial to evaluating their need and desire for mobility.

Erin Barbato examines the reception of Afghan nationals in the United States within the framework of Operation Allies Welcome, an emergency evacuation and resettlement operation that took place in 2021. She focuses on Fort McCoy, a military base in Wisconsin. As Clinical Professor and Director of the Immigrant Justice Clinic at the University of Wisconsin Law School, she had access to the premises of the military base. The empirical side of her chapter relies on direct experience of the reception of refugees into the US and informal and formal discussions with NGOs, as well as information from

academic articles, press releases and policy papers. Her conceptual framework revolves around the notion of humanitarian government. Her research explores the participation in humanitarian government of various local actors, such as government and NGO employees, as well as community volunteers and veterans, and she highlights their crucial role in the implementation of humanitarianism. Her work is particularly original in that it focuses on actors such as veterans, whose role is not generally taken into account in studies of local government's role in reception.

Andrew BurrIDGE looks at the use of hotels to detain asylum seekers in Australia, classified as 'alternative places of detention' (APODs) by the Australian government. His research is based on detainee accounts, media reporting, independent inquiries and official inspections of these sites. He argues that APODs can be better understood as sites of *non-care*. His chapter offers an analysis of the local scale of hotel detention and highlights the extent to which carceral spaces can be found in urban spaces, creating 'everyday carceralities'. Finally, he shows that the use of hotels, which was initially proposed as a measure to remove children and vulnerable adults from detention facilities and enable them to access care, and later used for medical transfers from offshore detention, has proven to be a long-term and durable form of detention that has created significant harm through cramping and choking.

Camps as economic resources

The final section of this collection explores an emerging trend: how camps and refugee reception are envisioned globally as sites of economic development and innovation (Betts and Collier, 2017). Indeed, the economic dimension of camp and migration management has already been analysed in terms of the privatization of asylum (Darling, 2016b). Scholars have shown how refugees are governed in accordance with a neoliberal approach (Bhagat, 2020; McGuirk and Pine, 2020). However, the literature has not yet considered how camps are used across the world to produce value by a range of different actors, who are often not thought of as part of the reception process. In order to close this gap, the contributions to this section highlight the negotiations and competition between a multitude of actors involved in the development of camps, who are creating overlapping economic networks of various kinds with a global reach. The contributions also emphasize how camps are increasingly envisioned as tools of urban or regional development, involving, for example, housing companies and transmunicipal cooperation. While the reception of refugees is often reliant on centralized or external funding (provided by central governments or donors, for example) and is affected by austerity measures (Darling, 2016a), camps can become 'localized' economic opportunities for some actors, such as those in the tourism industry.

Evan Easton-Calabria's chapter examines the case of Arua, an important secondary city in Uganda's West Nile region, close to the South Sudanese and Congolese borders. Arua City is located between refugee camps, and its population has tripled due to urban refugees. Indeed, a quarter of the over 1 million South Sudanese refugees in Uganda live in Arua District. The chapter investigates the relations between camps and cities, in particular when refugees leave camps for cities or engage in circular migration between the two. Her research is based on qualitative data that she collected during fieldwork involving in-person and remote semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation between 2019 and 2021 with urban refugees, local and central government officials and international and national refugee-serving organizations. By taking a political economy approach and drawing on Foucault's discussion of the relevance of populations to political economy, Easton-Calabria looks at the impact of refugees' status as non-residents in many urban areas and their lack of 'statistical existence' in cities in relation to government control. In relation to the local turn in refugee studies, her chapter highlights the often underacknowledged role of municipal and local authorities in the reception of urban refugees and the economic connections between cities and camps.

René Kreichauf investigates the case of refugee accommodation in Berlin as a migration industry. In his chapter, he analyses the making of the refugee accommodation industry by a set of state and non-state actors, institutions, organizations, practices and services that refugees become entangled with upon arrival. He shows that the industry is marked by neoliberal urban governance and market restructuring processes, involving periods of privatization and remunicipalization. He argues that accommodation industries have become an integral part and tool of housing provision and urban development. He further demonstrates that, in the case of Berlin, accommodation industries are an experimental field for urban and housing planning where new opportunities for profiting from refugees are created. The originality of his chapter is to introduce a political-economic perspective to the local turn of refugee governance.

In his chapter, Bram J. Jansen studies a recent shift which has led to refugee camps being considered as sites for investment and innovation. He takes as examples a combined project involving the cities of Amsterdam and Amman and Zaatari camp in Jordan, as well as other projects and events conducted in the camps at Kakuma in Kenya and on Lesbos in Greece. The methodology he employs is based on an auto-ethnographic approach. He collected his data through a long-term engagement with refugee camps, as an expert in workshops and meetings and an external consultant, and on two field visits to Jordan. His theoretical perspective follows Massey's approach to place, inasmuch as he considers the camp to be a 'particular constellation of social relations'. He shows that camps are being increasingly invested in by 'new'

actors such as private organizations, municipal authorities and corporations. In his view, the local turn should take into account the actors involved in the design and planning of the camps who nevertheless work in areas a long distance from them. His chapter also demonstrates that considering camps as spaces for investment and innovation contributes to a shift in priorities – ‘from refugee protection based on individual vulnerabilities to developmental and infrastructural planning for the common good’.

Nina Valerie Kolowratnik and Johannes Pointl’s chapter investigates the use of tourism establishments to accommodate asylum seekers in Austria. It is based on fieldwork carried out in asylum accommodation, including interviews with refugees, private proprietors, NGOs and government representatives as well as mapping workshops in the accommodation. Moreover, it employs spatial mapping techniques as its primary working methodology, mapping being understood as an activist tool in their research. It aims at rendering visible hidden qualities of spatial, social, economic and temporal relationships. Kolowratnik and Pointl’s conceptual approach is informed by the concept of the total institution coined by the sociologist Erving Goffman. They show how outsourcing asylum seekers’ accommodation to private providers has led to the emergence of a flexible local governance which is often guided by economic considerations. As far as local conditions for asylum seekers are concerned, though, this results in the absence of a proper living environment.

Localized manifestations of global processes

By focusing on localized manifestations of the globalized processes of refugee reception and camp governance that Darling’s chapter introduces, the contributions to this collection hint at what connects the diverse geographies and politics of reception and camps around the world while at the same time emphasizing local variations. They do so by focusing on the relations between camps and cities, the provision of care in camps and camps as economic resources. They emphasize how, across the world, a multitude of actors intervene in these processes, beyond actors who are officially involved in reception and camp governance, or commonly viewed as such. They highlight how reception and camps are marked by a ‘crossing’ of their spatial and time boundaries, often placing camp residents in a quasi-universal condition of semi-permanent reception but also establishing geographical, political, social and economic relations between camps and their surroundings, between camp residents and other local(ized) actors.

By focusing on localized dynamics amid global processes of reception, the authors highlight continuities behind apparent ruptures, such as the spatial informalization of refugees analysed in Stel’s chapter. They also underline how municipal authorities strategically position themselves as actors in

migration management, resulting in the production of novel geographies of responsibility as discussed in Lemaire and Oesch's chapter, as well as forms of humanitarian municipalism as analysed in Koepke's chapter. The authors also hint at how the local governance of reception and camps has to be understood as not only a field of policy implementation but also policy development, as argued in Collins-Bojovic and Minca's chapter. Nevertheless, while highlighting the role of municipal actors and other actors involved in local governance processes, they also emphasize the continuous exercise of central state power, as stressed by the possible dismantling of camps in Datta's chapter.

By focusing on the imbrication of local and global processes, the authors also draw our attention to how the provision of care – and the humanitarian governance that camps are subjected to – goes beyond control, with relationships between migrants and people working in the camps being marked for example by informality, curiosity and rivalry, as emphasized in Reichl and Winters' chapter. They also stress the role of civil society, as well as of other kinds of actors such as smugglers (Collins and Minca's chapter), army veterans (Barbato's chapter) and owners of tourism facilities (Kolowratnik and Pointl's chapter). They also underline how reception and detention can become entangled, leading to situations of *non-care* as highlighted in Burrridge's chapter.

Finally, the authors to this collection also emphasize the economic ties between camps and their surroundings, with camp residents engaging in economic exchanges with the cities in, or close to, which they are located, but also in circular migration movements, as highlighted in Easton-Calabria's chapter. They also stress how camps and refugee accommodation are a potential source of profit, as underlined in Kreichauf's chapter and Kolowratnik and Pointl's chapter, as well as becoming localized spaces of global investments, as emphasized in Jansen's chapter.

Note

¹ For more information on the REFUGOV project, please go to www.refugov.com. This edited collection was produced within the framework of this project.

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Setting the Scene: Refugee Reception and the Challenge of ‘the Local’

Jonathan Darling

Introduction

In September 2020, the UK Home Office began using a series of former military barracks just outside Folkestone in Kent to accommodate asylum seekers during the processing of their asylum claims. The site was a contingency measure and was operated by the contractor Clearsprings, who held a contract to accommodate asylum seekers across South East England. By the end of 2020, 400 men were being housed at the site, and conditions were reported to be dire. Hunger strikes, self-harm and suicide attempts occurred, and there were significant concerns over the ability of residents to socially distance during the COVID-19 pandemic, not least because the men were accommodated in dormitories of 14. Those accommodated were initially told they would be staying in this institutional setting for no more than a month, but this was quickly extended to the point of being indefinite. The uncertainty of this timeframe and the securitized conditions of the facility served to further harm the mental health of those being held there.

At the end of January 2021, one of the buildings at Napier barracks was set on fire, leading to significant damage, condemnation from government and media-driven suspicion of residents. In response, the-then Home Secretary Priti Patel stated:

The damage and destruction at Napier barracks is not only appalling but deeply offensive to the taxpayers of this country who are providing this accommodation while asylum claims are being processed. This type of action will not be tolerated and the Home Office will support

the police to take robust action against those vandalizing property, threatening staff and putting lives at risk. This site has previously accommodated our brave soldiers and army personnel – it is an insult to say that it is not good enough for these individuals. I am fixing our broken asylum system, and will be bringing forward legislation this year to deliver on that commitment. (Patel, 2021)

The commitment that Patel refers to here is to an increasingly restrictive form of accommodation, mirroring the forms of camp infrastructure that have emerged across Europe since the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ (Kreichauf, 2018). Home Office decision making had slowed to a near standstill in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, and this backlog was exacerbated further by the pandemic, delaying asylum decisions for years and placing additional pressure on accommodation provision. It is in this context that the Home Office, alongside their contracted private accommodation providers, turned to a mixture of hotel accommodation and institutional settings such as Napier barracks as ‘contingency’ accommodation. This ‘crisis’ in provision was manufactured from a combination of Home Office delays and backlogs and the inability of private accommodation providers to procure adequate accommodation in the face of shifting demands from the Home Office (Darling, 2022a). Crucially, such a ‘crisis’ has been used to legitimate a return to institutional settings and military installations and away from community-focused dispersal housing. This has been a move made irrespective of its impacts on those seeking asylum.

In Napier, this meant a wilful disregard for the safety of those seeking sanctuary. At the height of the ‘second wave’ of the COVID-19 pandemic in the winter of 2020, 50 per cent of the 400 residents in Napier barracks were infected. A subsequent investigation showed that the Home Office ignored Public Health England advice that the dormitory accommodation was unsuitable during the pandemic. The site was argued to have lacked opportunities for social distancing as well as providing inadequate medical care and extremely limited social support. The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) described the site as ‘filthy’ and ‘impoverished’, and a joint ICIBI and HM Inspectorate of Prisons report concluded that the site was unsuitable for long-term accommodation use (ICIBI, 2021). In response to such concerns, the Home Office simply stated that ‘[w]e secured permission to use Napier barracks for 12 months and while pressure on the asylum system remains will continue to make use of the site’ (Grierson, 2021). After a brief pause in its use, the Home Office began to repopulate the barracks with asylum seekers in April 2021.

Napier barracks present one example of the multiple ways European states have responded to refugee mobility. Punctuated by two global events, the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe of 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic

and its ongoing effects on mobility patterns and bordering (Wemyss and Yuval-Davis, 2020; Aradua and Tazzioli, 2021), the last decade has seen the development of increasingly restrictive and punitive forms of refugee reception and accommodation, foregrounding practices of carceral containment as much as forms of concern and care (Darling, 2022a). The appropriation of Napier barracks for the accommodation of asylum seekers sits squarely in the midst of these trends. Initially mobilized as a temporary form of contingency accommodation, Napier continued to be in use until recently, but was meant to cease to accommodate asylum seekers and be passed back to the Ministry of Defence in September 2025 (Taylor, 2025).

In this chapter, I examine the case of Napier barracks as a site of refugee reception in order to explore the intersections between refugee reception and discussions of the ‘local’ dynamics of asylum. In doing so, I draw out the relational connections of policy, practice and discourse that extend beyond the ‘local’ battleground of the barracks themselves in order to position such battlegrounds in relation to a global regime of refugee reception. In tracing how the case of Napier illuminates different patterns of refugee reception, from the militarization of accommodation to the reiteration of stigma and differentiation, the chapter develops a critical account of how discussions of refugee reception might engage with, and extend beyond, the possibilities and limits of a ‘local’ account of asylum policy and politics. At a time of increasingly restrictive border enforcement across the world, and a narrowing of the scope for supportive forms of refugee reception and integration, accounting for the relations that constitute refugee reception is of critical importance to any effort to sustain, and improve, forms of reception that support the safety, security and dignity of those seeking refuge.

In exploring these dynamics of reception, the chapter builds on research into the development and evolution of structures to accommodate and support asylum seekers in the UK. This has involved empirical work examining the practice of dispersing asylum seekers, including interviews with local authorities, refugee support organizations and asylum seekers (Darling, 2022a), alongside discursive analysis of the political and press rhetoric that has surrounded asylum accommodation. The case of Napier barracks offers one high-profile example of how refugee reception and asylum policy became focal points of contestation in the UK during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is this discursive work that this chapter draws most fully upon.

The chapter proceeds by first situating an understanding of Napier within discussions of refugee reception and the ‘local turn’ in migration studies. The subsequent section focuses on two dynamics of this ‘local’ turn: a concern with multiple actors shaping responses to migration and a focus on forms of ‘local’ contestation that challenge national policies. The chapter then returns to the case of Napier to highlight two further dynamics that advance our

understandings of the ‘local’ in refugee governance: first, a set of relational connections that extend beyond ‘the local’ and situate Napier within a wider regime of global refugee reception and unequal mobility; second, a series of reiterated patterns of policy, perception and prejudice that the use of Napier reinstates. Exploring these relational qualities offers a means to add depth to what a turn to the ‘local’ means for studies of refugee reception and encampment, serving to situate sites like Napier within global regimes of inequality, differential inclusion and violent bordering. To begin, I turn to the ‘local’.

Refugee reception and the ‘local turn’

Recent years have seen a growing focus on the role of multiple ‘local’ actors in shaping, and implementing, policies and practices regarding refugee reception and accommodation in both the Global North and the Global South (Filomeno, 2016; Ahouga, 2018; Glorius and Doomernik, 2020). Driven in part by attempts to recognize and account for the complexities and ambiguities of governance in contexts of displacement, this work has drawn attention to diverse relations between local governments, international humanitarian organizations, private contractors, non-governmental organizations and public and private service providers. Many of these connections are evident through the chapters that comprise this collection, with refugee reception and camp infrastructures being critical sites of ‘local’ negotiation and contestation.

A focus on these forms of ‘local’ negotiation has emerged in part as a response to the ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002) of much past work on migration. By drawing attention to actions and policies below the level of the nation-state, examinations of the ‘local’ dynamics of migration governance have sought to unpack how policies designed at a national level are implemented at a local level while also foregrounding how such policies are reworked, resisted or refused by actors at the forefront of implementing and enacting policy (Kos et al, 2016; Spencer and Delvino, 2019). A local turn thus marks ‘a shift away from solely examining the national level to studying the growing divergence between national and local immigration policies’ (Kühn, 2021: 48). In such instances, the ‘local’ is most often associated with the processes and practices of local or municipal government as a scale of action (Baumgärtel and Miellet, 2022). Read as such, the ‘local’ describes both a scale of action and authority – a local government or municipal authority – and a range of actors that cohere around that authority to deliver policy through forms of collaboration and negotiation. It is this diverse range of actors involved in migration governance at a local level that some have labelled a ‘local migration regime’ (Lebuhn, 2013; Hinger et al, 2016), pinpointing the interactions between a multitude

of interested parties in refugee and migration governance, including ‘immigrant organizations, civil rights groups, trade union chapters, chambers of commerce, housing and real estate agencies’ and border enforcement agencies (Lebuhn, 2013: 47). Others have referred to such dynamics of negotiation as a manifestation of the ‘local state’ in immigration control (Cohen, 2002; Darling, 2022b), referring to the various public, private and third-sector actors that coalesce around policy making, representation and rights with regard to migration within and beyond local governments. At the same time, such ‘local’ negotiations have also focused attention on how migrants themselves encounter and contest multiple forms of authority, drawing attention to the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees remake ‘local’ contexts through both daily routines and practices and more disruptive political claims (Darling, 2017; Sanyal, 2021).

In these contexts, research has explored the role of local government in taking up devolved and decentralized state authority, from responsibilities for refugee reception to roles within forms of border enforcement and control (Darling and Bauder, 2019; Baumgärtel and Miellet, 2022). Within such decentralization, discussions of the ‘local’ have highlighted the growing autonomy of ‘local’ actors in migration governance, such that policies on migration, refuge and sanctuary are emergent from ‘local’ contexts that speak back to, and often directly contradict or challenge, policies designed at national levels. Various tense or harmonious, these local contexts have been referred to as ‘battlegrounds’ of competing policies and political imaginaries (Ambrosini, 2021) or as a site of negotiation and interdependence among competing priorities (Hinger et al, 2016; Axelsson and Pettersson, 2021). These tensions produce considerable variation in migration governance and refugee reception, as local contexts and border regimes shape how devolved authority is claimed, mobilized or denied (Glorius et al, 2019). It is these tensions that have most often been a focal point of critical study, notably in contexts where urban authorities have asserted the authority to define, and enact, their own policies towards migration. In these terms, discussions of the ‘local’ have foregrounded urban policy making and sanctuary developments (Bauder and Gonzalez, 2018; Caponio, 2018; Darling and Bauder, 2019), negotiations involving public, private and civil society actors (Hinger and Schäfer, 2019; Miellet, 2022), the tensions of multi-level governance and policy coordination (Emilsson, 2015; Sabchev, 2021) and contestations of political agency that emerge at the local level (Oesch, 2017; Darling, 2021).

In offering a corrective to the methodological nationalism of past studies, a turn to the local has drawn attention to the multitude of actors and authorities who have a stake in refugee reception. However, such discussions are not without their limits. To date, the ‘local turn’ has tended to privilege the urban as the scale of the ‘local’, often overlooking rural and small-town locations for refugee reception and integration (Baumgärtel and Miellet, 2022). Work on

rural sanctuary and integration (Schmid-Scott, 2020; Glorius et al, 2021) and the role of small towns in refugee resettlement (Bonizzoni and Marzorati, 2015; Miellet, 2022) has sought to draw attention to these omissions, but a broader consideration of how ‘local’ dynamics are understood in rural contexts would be a valuable advance to such research. Equally, there is a risk of romanticizing and prioritizing the ‘local’ over and above other scales of reference, such that, in correcting the closures of methodological nationalism, scholarship risks falling into a ‘local trap’ (Purcell, 2006) that assumes an authenticity or pragmatism that is denied to the national scale. In these terms, recent discussions of the autonomy and political potential of the city as a space to challenge the nation-state (Barber, 2013) should be cautious in proposing an urban boosterism that views the city as a site of political possibility but overlooks how such possibility is intertwined with the city’s role as a space of confinement, control and border violence (Darling, 2017; Kreichauf, 2021).

For this collection, a turn to the local can thus offer a lens through which to explore the negotiations of refugee reception, policy development and implementation, but it can also risk an inward focus that examines the ‘local’ as a *container* for the policies and politics of refuge and integration. In countering such a risk, recent work has begun to take seriously the relational connections of a ‘local turn’, with discussions of community sponsorship and community-led migrant rights activism (Baumgärtel and Pett, 2022; Tan, 2022) tracing how these responses to mobility are not restricted to the reception of those already ‘here’ but extend beyond this into patterns of spatially extensive sponsorship. Similarly, regime analyses have begun to situate ‘local’ border regimes in conjunction with wider assemblages of authority and governance (Hinger and Schäfer, 2019), and analyses of the effect of urban policy making on refugee support and integration have begun to trace how cities are forging transnational patterns of solidarity through networks of collaboration and coordination (Oomen, 2020; Spencer, 2022). Nevertheless, as Zill et al (2020) argue, in an analysis of street-level reception policies and facilities in Germany, there is scope to more fully explore the ‘local’ politics of reception from a relational perspective, not least where negotiations over refugee reception are sites of significant tension and turbulence and where the varied perspectives and experiences of refugees themselves can be brought to the fore in such negotiations. Understanding the ‘battlegrounds’ of local asylum policy as relationally constituted can thus advance the discussions of refugee reception that run through this book. It is with this agenda in mind that I return to Napier barracks.

Contingency and contracting

To approach Napier barracks from the perspective of the ‘local’ dynamics of policy and governance is to draw attention to the different actors

and authorities responsible for shaping this site and its use as a form of contingency accommodation. In practice, that entails focusing on relations between the Home Office, their accommodation contractor Clearsprings, local government and a wide range of third-sector organizations, social movements and political organizations who have all taken an interest in the use, and future, of the site. Following the privatization of asylum accommodation in the UK in 2012 (Darling, 2022a), local authorities have had extremely limited ability to engage with and influence the process of asylum dispersal (Darling, 2022b). At the same time, refugee support organizations and charities have faced a combination of funding cuts, increasing demand for services and growing political hostility towards their work from within both the Home Office and the media, undermining their ability to contest and challenge government policy (Harries et al, 2019; Mayblin and James, 2019; Darling, 2022a). In line with analyses of ‘local’ controversies over asylum accommodation provision in Germany (Zill et al, 2021) and Denmark (Whyte et al, 2019), these tensions of authority and oversight critically shape how sites like Napier barracks are interpreted. With ‘contingent’ accommodation a requirement due to backlogs in the asylum system, and with a private accommodation contractor unable to procure further accommodation as planned, the reuse of a military site represented a seemingly appropriate choice for the Home Office, irrespective of opposition from local government or refugee charities.

The use of Napier barracks was thus imposed upon a local context of opposition as the Home Office secured the right to use the site from the Ministry of Defence and then passed the task of managing and running the accommodation to their contractor Clearsprings. While initial opposition to its use was foreclosed by the government in the name of crisis response and ‘emergency measures’ (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014), efforts to scale back the use of Napier were consistently rejected by government, with claims that the site had been improved in response to criticism being made right up until the decision to end use of the site in September 2025 (Grierson, 2021; Taylor, 2025). Far from a ‘local’ politics of negotiation or consultation, as seen in some European contexts (Zill et al, 2021), the Napier case exemplifies a more centralized and assertive model of sovereign authority. Since the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the UK Home Office has retained the capacity to impose asylum dispersal and accommodation arrangements on to local authorities across the country, and while that capacity has rarely been enacted (Webber, 2012; Darling, 2022a), it has been exercised most often at points of apparent ‘crisis’ such as this. The effect has been to shortcut potential opposition to the use of the barracks within local government and the local state and to effectively override any ‘asylum battleground’ (Ambrosini, 2021) of competing interests in the name of a rapid response.

At the same time, the contracting of Clearsprings to run the accommodation site at Napier forms part of a set of governance relations that embed authority within a private accommodation contractor. In this instance, Clearsprings are delivering on the policy priorities of the UK government, maintaining a minimum standard of accommodation for those seeking asylum. The running of Napier barracks is far from unique in this context, as the provision of asylum dispersal accommodation across the UK has been outsourced to private companies since 2012. However, what is distinct here is the form of accommodation being run. The dispersal accommodation that Clearsprings and other contractors regularly provide under their contracts is in the wider community and usually comprises a room in a house of multiple occupancy or a shared flat or apartment. In taking on the running of this more institutional site, Clearsprings were taking up a different role within the dynamics of dispersal, requiring learning on their part as to how to effectively run this more institutional model. For this purpose, they were invested with political authority and capital by the Home Office as they were positioned as the proxies of government on the ground. Here, as John Allen argues, ‘government initiatives are “detached” from the centre and “lodged” in subnational institutions and agencies to secure compliance’, resulting in authority being ‘not so much consented to as embedded’ in new actors (Allen, 2016: 50). Reflecting a relational power of ‘reach’ (Allen, 2016), in this model of governance outsourced actors become imbued with proxy authority and subject to the ‘reach’ of government. Concurrently, they also carry responsibilities, as the practice of outsourcing represents not just a transfer of responsibility from government to private sector contractors but also a process of ‘lengthening’ the pathways of mediation between an issue and the government. Thus, a politics of ‘reach’ may act to place political concerns ‘out of reach’ through ‘*stretching out* the exchanges between actors’ (Allen, 2016: 54, emphasis in original). When successful, such a politics acts to mediate opposition and insulate government from political and public anger. By investing private actors with authority as a means to ‘reach’ into ‘local’ negotiations around accommodation while remaining distant, the state is able to displace, temporarily at least, its responsibilities for asylum seekers (Darling, 2021). Considering such relations complicates any container account of the ‘local’ as a context in which asylum policies are fought over or contested. Instead, the local becomes one contextual site within a wider set of relations, influences and ongoing contests over authority.

Reception regimes

Positioning Napier in this way also encourages consideration of how this site operates as one example of a wider refugee reception regime that is global in scope and encompasses a range of reception approaches, models

and policies. Refugee reception, broadly defined, encompasses a significant breadth of different conditions and statuses, as the chapters across this collection highlight through their varied empirical cases. From the carceral conditions of refugee encampments and institutionalized initial reception centres on the southern borders of ‘fortress Europe’ (Mavelli, 2017; Papoutsis, 2021), to resettlement and integration schemes that support refugees in many European states (Hashimoto, 2018; Armbruster, 2019), refugee reception takes on varied forms and is situated along a continuum of carceral conditions, selective processing and assessments of moral and social worth. Situated as such, the case of Napier barracks foregrounds a particular trend within these dynamics of reception – a growing mobilization of military institutions and emergency responses that coalesce around both the containment of asylum seekers and refugees and their placement within visibly punitive environments, casting containment as part of a carceral condition that conveys expectations of control and regulation.

As border violence and pushbacks at the frontiers of Europe have grown (Isakjee et al, 2020; Minca and Collins, 2021), so measures of refugee reception have been narrowed, and those that remain are increasingly institutional in nature and restrictive in form. The mobilization of sites like Napier reflects this punitive turn in refugee reception, expressing a stark distinction between those classified as ‘genuine’ refugees ‘worthy’ of integration and resettlement and those categorized as ‘illegal’ or irregular presences in Europe and subject to suspicion and containment. The logics of distinction and classification that pattern refugee reception practices, be they at the European level or at the scale of the nation-state, rely on sites like Napier to contain those cast as questionable. Napier works as a site of dislocation in this context, removing asylum seekers from the community and accommodating them at an institutional distance from others. In contrast to the forms of community-oriented dispersal and housing that have formed the basis for asylum accommodation in the UK since the late 1990s (Darling, 2022a), institutional sites like Napier sit on the boundary between accommodation and detention, offering some freedom of movement and access but within highly constrained and controlled settings. In doing so, they stand in stark contrast to the forms of community sponsorship, resettlement and support shown to other refugee groups, from the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme to moves to support and accommodate Ukrainian refugees as an ‘exceptional’ group within the UK following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Armbruster, 2019). Napier is therefore reflective of a global regime of reception that is both narrow in its possibilities for refuge and increasingly brutal towards those not accepted by the nation-state.

In such a system, the use of a former military site is not a coincidence. Rather, the use of military infrastructures and institutions for accommodating

and containing those seeking refuge has two driving characteristics. On the one hand, barracks are mobilized as adaptable and flexible accommodation settings that can be secured and managed with relative ease. The infrastructure of security that accompanied such sites in their former military use can thus be temporarily and flexibly reappropriated to accommodate and secure those still under suspicion by the state. On the other hand, their use has a symbolic dimension as sites associated with carceral control and thus with being able to manage and regulate, often in quite punitive ways, those who are seeking asylum. The use of barracks conveys what Joseph [Pugliese \(2008: 207\)](#) terms the ‘carceral spectacle’ of the visible containment of refugees housed in former military camps and surrounded by razor-wire fences and visible security infrastructures. In such conditions, [Pugliese \(2008: 216\)](#) argues, ‘the mobilization of carceral and military aspects of architecture’ in the design and functioning of asylum accommodation conveys the message that those entering the nation ‘will be duly detained, disciplined and punished’, as visible razor-wire fences and barriers to entry and exit communicate a distinction between citizen and refugee that is at the heart of the carceral dynamics of refugee reception as a process of sorting and categorizing those on the thresholds of the nation-state. As René [Kreiclauf \(2018\)](#) has argued, sites of carceral spectacle like Napier are increasingly prevalent in European responses to refugee mobility and displacement, as forms of accommodation take on camp-like qualities of containment, restriction and stark distinctions between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. These forms of contingent and temporary accommodation, often mobilized in response to perceived ‘crises’ as with the case of Napier, rely upon enrolling private actors and companies into the practice of refugee reception and carceral control. At the same time, they produce an unstable and insecure landscape of refugee reception, based as they are on facilities intended to be temporary in form, and designed as such, but that become permanent fixtures in the containment of refugee lives.

The growing use of military infrastructures for the accommodation of asylum seekers and refugees represents one dynamic in the global patterning of refugee reception. Understanding the ‘local’ politics of sites such as Napier thus extends to situating them within global and transnational circuits of policy development, articulation and change, such that ideas on how to contain, manage and regulate migrant lives developed in one context travel and adapt as they move between policy contexts. For instance, the forms of ‘carceral spectacle’ [Pugliese \(2008\)](#) focuses on are embedded within the Australian government’s immigration detention estate, a spectacle that has been used across Europe to shape reception facilities as carceral spaces. Similarly, the off-shore processing of asylum seekers undertaken by governments in Australia, the United States and more recently the UK all point to a circulation of policy responses to displacement that prioritize the removal of those seeking refuge and their containment within remote locations ([Collyer and King,](#)

2015; Mountz, 2020). In Napier, these resonances of policy connection are evident in the imposition of non-disclosure agreements on staff and visitors to the site, a situation summed up by one legal practitioner in the following terms: ‘This is yet another trick they’re pulling from Australia. They did this for people working on Nauru and Manus Island. Over and over again they’re learning from Australia’s playbook’ (Sonia Lenegan, Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association, cited in Grierson, 2020).

Patterns of policy mobility and transnational learning are thus reflective of a global framing of refugee reception. From the circulation of policies towards secrecy and security in accommodation and detention to the use of the same, or strikingly similar, international security firms for contracting (Martin, 2021), refugee reception and control practices tie governments together in relational webs of connection. Just as we have seen the ‘rebordering of the world’ (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, so we have also seen the development of global patterns of reception in response to displacement and the growing prominence of private security firms and contractors in shaping policies on refugee reception (Axelsson and Pettersson, 2021). It is in these relational connections that spaces like Napier barracks take on new meaning, not just as symbolic and visible spectacles of carceral control but also as experiments in reception and regulation that other countries, other contractors and other contexts might learn from. In such patterns of connection, we also witness a trend towards policy repetition, and it is with this that I want to conclude my discussion of Napier.

Recycling stigma

The mobilization of Napier barracks as a form of emergency accommodation is not without precedent in the UK. Indeed, former military sites have been used for immigration detention since 2000 (Leddy-Owen, 2016), and at various stages during that time ex-military installations have been considered as potential sites for accommodation, often being halted only as a result of pressure from local communities (Hubbard, 2005). At the same time as the development of Napier barracks as a site of accommodation, the Home Office were abandoning plans to house up to 200 asylum seekers in portable buildings on the site of a former immigration removal centre in Bedfordshire. The plan was for portable accommodation to be placed alongside the removal centre, but this was scrapped following opposition from campaign groups and lawyers. Thus, just as the use of military facilities for accommodation must be situated in relation to transnational networks of security contractors, policy mobilities and models of ‘campization’ (Kreichauf, 2018), this local iteration of refugee reception can also be viewed as a recycling of past approaches to the management and accommodation of those seeking refuge. Forms of carceral containment are persistent and

reiterative features of how refugee reception is enacted by many European nation-states and is situated as part of a moral economy of worthiness that distinguishes between different refugee groups and claims.

In the UK, this logic of distinction is evident in how different groups of refugees are treated but also in how the means of arrival in the UK has become, in itself, a defining characteristic of assumed ‘worthiness’ for reception. As Diane Taylor notes: ‘Afghans who travel to the UK via schemes such as the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy or Afghan citizens’ resettlement scheme will not be housed in Napier barracks, but Afghan asylum seekers who travel by methods such as small boats may be accommodated there’ (Taylor, 2021). The distinction drawn here between modes of arrival has no bearing in international law nor does it carry any justification for the different treatment experienced by refugees in the UK who are subject to such a distinction. Instead, it is a purely political designation, designed to communicate a difference in status between those refugees travelling through highly limited resettlement routes and all others. Sites like Napier become associated with those others, those who have made ‘irregular’ journeys and are thus under suspicion by the state, and it is on this basis that the poor conditions of accommodation are, in part, justified. As the Home Office made clear in response to criticism of conditions in Napier barracks in 2021: ‘Any provision of support over and beyond what is necessary to enable the individuals to meet their housing and subsistence needs could undermine public confidence in the asylum system and hamper wider efforts to tackle prejudice and promote understanding within the general community and amongst other migrant groups’ (Bulman, 2021). The poor conditions in Napier, and the exposure to infection risk that such a site carried, were thus justified by a desire to maintain a ‘tough’ asylum system that would meet only the most basic of needs. From this perspective, to provide anything more than survival would be to undermine the drive to deterrence that has shaped government policy towards asylum since the late 1990s (Bloch and Schuster, 2005).

In this stark statement, we witness an acceptance of the bare minimum as an intentional set of conditions for those seeking asylum. As Imogen Tyler (2020: 18) argues, today ‘stigma is purposefully crafted as a strategy of government, in ways that often deliberately seek to foment and accentuate inequalities and injustices’, and the distinctions in refugee reception reflect these inequalities. The stigma of Napier barracks as a ‘carceral spectacle’ of minimum support and survival is attached to certain refugee groups and not others, thus reproducing distinctions in status and in the apparent ‘worth’ of asylum seekers and refugees. While Napier might be situated within a global refugee reception regime of policy transfer and distinctions between refugee groups, it also forms part of a set of local negotiations of stigma, spectacle and punitive control, targeted at asylum seekers making ‘irregular’ journeys

and at a public audience requiring ‘confidence’ in the UK asylum system and its capacity to differentiate the ‘worthy’ from the ‘unworthy’ (Sales, 2002). It is in this filtering function, and its carceral conditions, that a site such as Napier reflects the realities of refugee reception in the contemporary politics of asylum, as a process still cut through with often violent distinctions in status, attachments of stigma and relations to encampment. These are the relations that form a core dynamic of this collection and that I have sought to briefly outline through this chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to explore some of the varied intersections between refugee reception and discussions of the ‘local’ dynamics of asylum. In particular, I have made the case for situating an understanding of the local negotiations and politics of asylum in relational terms, positioning the ‘local’ as constituted through a series of connections. These relations might be spatial in nature, situating refugee reception practices as part of global regimes of reception that rely on policy networks and practices of distinction between different groups of refugees and that are operated by combinations of state and non-state actors who work across international boundaries. At the same time, these relations are often temporal in nature too, reflecting the reiteration and recycling of reception practices, institutions, sites and discourses over time and between locations. In exploring the use of Napier barracks as a temporary site of accommodation that has become increasingly permanent in its use as a ‘carceral spectacle’ for those seeking asylum in the UK, I have begun to trace some of these connections beyond the ‘local’ battleground of the barracks themselves. As the reception of refugees and asylum seekers across Europe becomes an increasingly fraught, and increasingly restrictive endeavour, reflecting the trends of stigmatization and differentiation that are evident in UK policy and practice (Darling, 2022a), it is critical to examine the spatial and temporal relations that constitute reception as a practice and that situate it within varied constellations of local actors, discourses, communities and activists. The chapters that shape the rest of this collection begin some of that work and seek to respond with nuance and care to the political and moral challenges posed by reception and encampment as contemporary, and enduring, responses to displacement.

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PART I

**Camps and Their Relations
with Cities**

Local Governance of/through Informal Refugee Camps: Revisiting Lebanon's Palestinian and Syrian 'Gatherings'

Nora Stel

Introduction

How do local authorities seek to govern refugee camps that do not officially exist? This chapter addresses this question in the context of Lebanon, the country that hosts the highest number of refugees per capita worldwide. Once infamous for its Palestinian refugee camps, Lebanon is now known for its 'no-camp policy' vis-à-vis Syrian refugees. Yet these binary extremes obscure more than they reveal. Less than half of Lebanon's Palestinians actually reside in official refugee camps, with many living in administratively non-existent 'gatherings'. At the same time, almost a quarter of the country's Syrian refugees *do* live in de facto camps. Tellingly, while these are generally described using the humanitarian term 'informal tented settlements', Lebanese governance documents actually use the same term for them as for Palestinian informal camps: gatherings (*tajammouat* in Arabic) (Kikano et al, 2021: 433).

This chapter therefore explores the parallels between Lebanon's different approaches to governing these informal refugee spaces. Specifically, I study how the informal spatial set-up of these various 'campscapes' allows for a consistently informalized engagement with the various 'representatives' of the respective refugee communities. I argue that the informal nature of these campscapes enables and legitimizes the securitized stance that various local Lebanese state authorities adopt towards refugee representatives. This particular governmentality allows these authorities to shirk their

responsibilities to care for refugee communities while also providing them with a specific disciplinary mechanism to control refugees. The informal nature of refugee spaces, then, is not merely a context for but an instrument of governance. The notion of ‘the local’ is a crucial element of such informalization as it projects imaginaries of isolated and improvised practices of engagement with refugee communities that defy critical scrutiny of the more wide-ranging disciplinary effects of informalization.

Highlighting and revisiting the spatial dimensions of the broader politics of uncertainty that Lebanon employs towards refugee communities, which was central to a previous book project of mine (Stel, 2020), this chapter proceeds in three main sections. First, I situate my argument in the broader literature on refugee camps. Second, I juxtapose in-depth empirical case studies with the governance of Palestinian and Syrian campscapes. Third, I put these conceptual and empirical reflections into conversation to highlight how teasing out the local politics of informalization reveals significant disciplinary continuities in refugee governance that may be obscured by official national policies.

Rethinking the localization and informalization of refugee spaces as a governmentality

By taking the camp as the logical unit of analysis for studying refugee governance, refugee studies has helped to reproduce it as the self-evident and quintessential refugee space (Agier, 2011; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2013). This has resulted in sophisticated analyses of the biopolitical humanitarian governance of refugees through such encampments, while productively – but, as has increasingly been observed, also slightly problematically (Minca et al, 2021) – approaching the camp as a ‘space of exception’ (Agamben, 2005). Camps, in this logic, both enact and guarantee the temporary nature of refugees’ presence. The spatial arrangement of the camp then operates to place groups outside dominant legal regimes but simultaneously inside specific surveillance and repression regimes (Hanafi and Long, 2010; Agier, 2011).

Globally, however, fewer and fewer refugees are hosted, or ‘warehoused’ (Janmyr and Knudsen, 2016), in refugee camps (Norman, 2021: 3). Instead, ‘self-settlement’ has become the preferred spatial approach for humanitarian agencies and host countries alike (Hovil, 2007). Refugee studies has, accordingly, gradually de-exceptionalized its approach to studying the spatial dimensions of refugee governance, building bridges to urban studies and work on, for instance, informal settlements or slums (Agier, 2011; Sanyal, 2014, 2017; Huq and Miraftab, 2020). Here, Diana Martin’s (2015) notion of the ‘campscape’ and Faranak Miraftab’s (in Huq and Miraftab, 2020: 354) concept of the ‘slumscape’ are helpful in designating the fluid nature of refugee spaces.

Yet these formal camps on the one hand and autonomous self-settlements on the other remain extremes on a continuum of refugee spaces. While most refugees do not reside in traditional state-led or United Nations (UN)-coordinated refugee camps and, as such, are ‘self-settled’, many of them do live in spaces characterized by a collective refugee presence and organization and the related humanitarian governance, which I discuss here as informal settlements. These can either be in urban settings, de facto neighbourhoods or be more spatially autonomous, de facto villages, but what defines them is their ‘unplanned’ and unrecognized character (Sanyal, 2017: 118). Thus, despite crucial similarities with urban slums housing marginalized and often illegalized populations, manifestations of exceptionalism in refugee spaces may still be significantly different in terms of temporal governmentalities as well as transnational identifications (Malkki, 1992; Peteet, 1996). Thus, the end of de jure encampment is not the end of de facto camps.

In this chapter, I am concerned with the question of how state authorities govern such de facto refugee camps, understood as practically delineated spaces with an explicit and majority refugee population that are not formally designated as camps (Stel, 2020). To engage with this question, I make use of the concept of informality (Sanyal, 2017). Unrecognized camps can also be regarded as informal camps: refugee spaces not recognized and addressed in official state policies (Yassin et al, 2016). This does not mean that these spaces are not governed. An array of state and non-state actors are likely to try to regulate and control them and their inhabitants, but this will happen without resorting to official policy. Crucially, then, spatial informality (specific places not being recognized as administrative entities) leads to governance informality (regulation beyond the realm of formal state policy). This dynamic is often enabled or exacerbated by refugees’ legal precariousness, as they may lack either refugee or residency status. Informality is thereby closely related to illegality and extra-legality and with bureaucratic invisibility and illegibility (Griffiths, 2013; Janmyr and Mourad, 2018).

Approaching de facto camps as informal camps enables a critical reflection on the origins of such informality. In many of the transit-turned-host states in the Global South – although not only there (Stel, 2021) – that shelter most of the world’s displaced population as a result of the Global North’s externalization of refugee hosting, state authorities are both unwilling and unable to care for refugees in line with international refugee law and humanitarian conventions (Norman, 2021). But they *do* seek to control them even if not through extensive refugee law or by furthering integration. In light of this, we need to account for the ways in which informality can function as an instrument of control (Biehl, 2015; Ilcan et al, 2018; Nassar and Stel, 2019). This covers not only the withholding of individual refugee or residency status but also the non-recognition of camps.

Just as illegality may be ‘planned’ (Chiodelli, 2012), informality can be ‘purposeful’ (Polese et al, 2018: 208). If, as Ananya Roy (2005: 149) maintains, state authorities themselves ‘determine what is informal and what is not’ and ‘which forms of informality will thrive and which will disappear’, informality becomes a potential instrument of governance (Stel, 2020). The following analysis thereby builds on and contributes to a multifaceted literature of informality as a technology of control or form of statecraft (Natter et al, 2023) that may not always be explicit, intentional or coherent but nevertheless serves state institutions’ interests (Tuckett, 2015).

Informality can operate as an instrument of governance by institutionalizing unpredictability – as rules, rights and regulations are not written down publicly – and therefore arbitrariness. This does not mean, of course, that formalization is always beneficial to refugees (indeed, formalization often means making repression official). Nor is the disciplinary functioning of informality absolute. It can also be productively appropriated by refugees and other marginalized groups (Tuckett, 2015; Stel, 2016; Ansems de Vries et al, 2024). Yet, it tends to favour those societal actors with significant economic or socio-political power – often not refugees.

For state authorities, informality generates flexibility and leeway and makes responsibility diffuse or deniable (Mourad, 2017). It amounts to an effective withdrawal of care that allows for a strategic ‘navigating between discipline and neglect’ (Gabrielli et al, 2022: 275; see also Pinelli, 2018). Localized informalization is thereby a particular manifestation of the partial and opportunistic ‘politics of abandonment’ that produces simultaneous impunity and marginalization for refugees (Davies et al, 2017: 8).

Indeed, for refugees, informality can contribute to uncertainty, confusion and ambivalence. This, in turn, may undercut collective action. Existential uncertainty – to which informality can contribute – may paralyse people and prevent them from acting as coherent subjects (Griffiths, 2013; Cullen Dunn, 2014; El-Shaarawi, 2015). These affective dimensions of ‘the politics of uncertainty and exhaustion’ contribute to rendering refugees controllable (Ansems de Vries et al, 2024).

Here, it is not simply the spatial dimensions but specifically the active localization dynamics of informalization that serve its disciplinary effects (Hinger et al, 2016). The relative spatial informality of settlements is partly a result of their decentralized character. Unlike camps, which are imagined to be run by national governments or international organizations, settlements are not merely unrecognized but also seen as disconnected, both vertically (lacking a connection to overarching central organs) and horizontally (as isolated spaces that lack connections among themselves). It is these fragmented administrative and organizational imaginaries that obfuscate their visibility besides enabling and entrenching their informality.

Because settlements are ‘local’ in ways that camps are not, their governance, specifically their interaction with refugee ‘representatives’, can be directed intermittently and without accountability by national authorities.

Indeed, many of the manifestations of local informalization described in this chapter are nationally ignored or denounced while simultaneously being unofficially encouraged and incentivized (Stel, 2020: 111) – a reality described by a Lebanese analyst using the metaphor of ‘roleplay’. He referred to national officials ritualistically displaying a presumed ignorance of informal campscapes on the part of local governance, while personal networks, political ties and sectarian community connections between local and national authorities ensure that national officials are in fact perfectly aware of local realities but choose to stay out of them (Stel, 2020; see also Ghaddar, 2017; Mourad, 2017).¹ This being the case, my analysis adds to our understanding of how encampment often entails a strategic outsourcing to ‘the local’ where informalization can be pursued, while national policies continue to refer to the technocratic tropes of the humanitarian camp or the neoliberalism of self-settlement.

The evolving governance of Lebanon’s campscapes: old wine in new bottles?

Lebanon hosts the highest per capita number of refugees worldwide. The country has approximately 200,000 Palestinian refugees and around 1.5 million Syrian refugees. The Syrian and Palestinian refugee crises in Lebanon are very different both qualitatively and quantitatively, and so is the country’s response to them (Mencütek, 2019).

Lebanon’s engagement with Syrian refugees is determined above all by its Palestinian ‘trauma’. Palestinian refugees went through a process of political emancipation and mobilization that, as far as many Lebanese are concerned, caused the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. This experience loomed like a ‘scarecrow’ over Lebanon’s response to the Syrian ‘crisis’ (Yassin et al, 2015: 46). Lebanon’s refusal to recognize Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon as refugees was meant to prevent a protracted presence like that of the Palestinian refugees in the country (Atallah and Mahdi, 2017). Preventing Syrian refugees’ political mobilization likewise was an attempt to prevent the emergence of an organization like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In short, an international development analyst working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon concluded, Lebanon’s engagement with Syrian refugees reflects what Lebanese elites see as the ‘lessons learned from the Palestinian presence’.²

These ‘lessons’ were particularly explicit in spatial terms. Lebanon’s Palestinian community is routinely associated with the 12 infamous refugee camps run by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in

the Near East (UNRWA) that have sheltered Palestinians in Lebanon since their displacement in the *Nakba* (Arabic for ‘catastrophe’) of 1948: the ethnic cleansing of historic Palestine in the process of the establishment of the state of Israel (Knudsen and Hanafi, 2011). Due to its trauma with these camps, which were broadly seen as the materialization of the threat to sovereignty posed to the Lebanese state by Palestinian parties and militias during ‘the long 1970s’ (Stel, 2017), Lebanon opted for a radical no-camp policy when Syrian refugees started to arrive in the country in 2011 (Carpi et al, 2016).

So, in governing its respective refugee presences, Lebanon has apparently made a profound shift in encampment policy. Yet, this ostensible move from one extreme to the other is misleading. Today, less than half of Lebanon’s Palestinians actually reside in official refugee camps, with many living in administratively non-existent ‘gatherings’ (Lebanese–Palestinian Dialogue Committee [LPDC], 2018). At the same time, almost a quarter of the country’s Syrian refugees *do* live in de facto camps, which, as noted previously, the Lebanese government designates with the same distinct term (REACH and UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014). This seems only fitting since similarities in the ways that Lebanese state actors control these spaces are striking. Indeed, it seems Lebanese elites have not only learned ‘lessons’ about what *not* to do when it comes to encampment but have also acquired ‘best practices’ in terms of spatial disciplining. In what follows, I outline these parallels in the imposed informality of Palestinian and Syrian gatherings that allows Lebanese authorities to control these spaces and communities through a combination of abandonment and co-optation.

The data underpinning the analysis of Palestinian gatherings were generated during fieldwork in 2012, 2013 and 2014, ten months of which were spent doing ethnographic work in two different localities, and consist of more than 270 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and informal meetings, five focus groups, extensive field observations and various documents (Stel, 2020). The data for the analysis of Syrian gatherings were produced through 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 18 more informal conversations conducted online in 2017 and 2018 as well as three months of fieldwork in 2018 by a research partner based in Zahle who conducted 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees and their representatives, humanitarian experts, state officials and Lebanese landlords plus a range of informal meetings with various stakeholders, including nine field visits to informal settlements (Stel, 2020).

Palestinian gatherings

In addition to the official UN-administered camps, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in two types of informal campscapes: ‘adjacent areas’, illegal extensions of formal camps (Hilal, 2010), and some 50 gatherings,

autonomous unofficial settlements that are not linked to formal camps. The most recent census among Palestinians living in refugee settlements in Lebanon finds that 45 per cent reside in formal camps and 55 per cent live in adjacent areas and gatherings (LPDC, 2018).

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC), one of the first organizations to work in the gatherings, has authoritatively defined a gathering as a settlement that:

- (1) Has a population of Palestinian refugees ...
- (2) Has no official UNRWA camp status or any other legal authority identified with responsibility for camp management.
- (3) Is expected to have clearly defined humanitarian and protection needs, or have a minimum of 25 households.
- (4) Has a population with a sense of being a distinct group living in a geographically identifiable area. (DRC, 2005: 4–5)

The gatherings' marginalization, by this definition, is thus related to their informal status. Gatherings can be considered stable and bounded, spatial, social and political communities. The term 'gathering' thus projects an illusory notion of 'atomistic and haphazard assembly' (Knudsen, 2018: 9). Yet, to this day, their status has not been resolved: they are neither Palestinian camps nor Lebanese villages. This situation is not self-evident or inevitable. My interlocutors regularly brought up the possibility of formalizing these gatherings, mostly meaning having them recognized as 'real' camps. This was, however, widely acknowledged to be absolute anathema to the Lebanese political consensus.

State authorities, mostly in the form of security agencies, can and do enter the gatherings, but, overall, because residents are neither citizens nor taxpayers, Lebanese municipalities do not consider the gatherings their responsibility (Stel and Van der Molen, 2015). According to national Lebanese law, people living in 'informal settlements' have no right to public services (Yassin et al, 2016: 8). So the Lebanese state claims sovereignty over Palestinian gatherings but does not take any responsibility for them. At the same time, there has been no agreement or decision on regulating gatherings or assigning them to the authority of other organizations (such as UNRWA or the PLO). In the gatherings, Palestinians' lack of citizenship and socio-economic rights is amplified by the undefined status of the spaces they live in, resulting in poverty – two thirds of the people in the gatherings live below the poverty line (Chabaan, 2014: 59) – and uncertain access to services.

The informal status of the gatherings has direct spatial implications as their residents are often threatened with eviction (Stel, 2016, 2020). Informality also reflects the way authority is exercised within the gatherings. Ever since the PLO's expulsion in 1982, Lebanon's Palestinian settlements have been governed by a 'web of complex power structures' including local governance

committees, related security committees, networks of notables, political factions, religious structures, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UNRWA representatives (Hanafi, 2008: 10). Notwithstanding this multiplicity, so-called Popular Committees are to some extent recognized by almost all these other actors as the closest thing to public representatives. In 70 per cent of Lebanon's Palestinian settlements, Popular Committees are the main coordinating body (DRC, 2005: 155).

The PLO installed Popular Committees to provide services, security and political representation in the camps in the 1960s (Suleiman, 2017: 27). The committees are regularly described as the gatherings' municipalities, overseeing service provision and the related informal taxation, operating as a land registry and serving as intermediaries in judicial matters and social conflict. Officially, the Palestinian Popular Committees in Lebanon fall under the Lebanese office of the PLO's Department of Refugee Affairs that oversees a Central Follow-Up Committee at national level, five regional Popular Committee offices and a Popular Committee in each settlement (Stel, 2016). Despite their official institutionalization and status as civil bodies, Popular Committees operate in a highly politicized way. Rather than being determined by the results of the prescribed elections, positions within each committee are allocated in a way that reflects the current power balance among the various Palestinian parties within the PLO, with the communities they claim to represent lamenting their nepotism and corruption (Hanafi, 2011; Stel, 2015). Notwithstanding initiatives to professionalize them (Suleiman, 2017: 26), overall Popular Committees lack capacity and legitimacy across the board.

Nevertheless, Popular Committees are present in every Palestinian settlement and have a long institutional history and broad social reach. They would arguably be a logical focal point for governance in the gatherings, especially when it comes to relations with Lebanese state agencies. The Central Follow-Up Committee for the Popular Committees in Lebanon requires its regional offices to 'work towards the activation and improvement of the relations with the neighbourhood, especially with the municipalities in the cities and the surrounding Lebanese villages'.³ And, in fact, Popular Committees appear to operate as the main reference point for Lebanese authorities in everyday engagement with Palestinian communities. Most municipalities have long-term engagements with both camps and gatherings with regard to matters of waste collection, maintenance of electrical equipment and permits to build and repair houses in addition to various social interactions in relation to weddings, funerals and religious holidays (Stel, 2015; Suleiman, 2017).

But – and this is crucial to their mutual power relations – regardless of this routine interaction between them and a wide range of local Lebanese state agencies, Popular Committees are not formally recognized by the Lebanese

state as relevant official representatives. This is evident from the absence of any documented acknowledgement and is regularly reconfirmed on the ground. The LPDC (2012) describes the Popular Committees as ‘quasi local authorities’. A mayor in south Lebanon referred to the Popular Committee in a neighbouring gathering as a ‘delegation of tribal spokesmen’.⁴ This informalization, in Sari Hanafi’s (2011: 36) words, is ‘purposeful’. Because Popular Committees lack official status (Stel, 2020), it is always up to the Lebanese state whether to deal with them as representatives of the Palestinian community and hold them responsible for it when this suits them or disown them when this is more convenient. While many local Lebanese state representatives work constructively with the Popular Committees, such engagement is always conditional on the personal goodwill of the Lebanese authority in question.

As a result, if Popular Committees are accountable at all, it is to their Lebanese counterparts, which they are fundamentally dependent on because of their informal status, rather than to their Palestinian constituencies. The Popular Committees’ informality makes their relations with Lebanese state agencies conditional upon, for instance, their policing of their communities on behalf of the Lebanese state. A Palestinian analyst summarized the relations between local Lebanese authorities and Palestinian Popular Committees as one of hierarchy and delegation, where Popular Committees are instrumentalized by security agencies to arrest and hand over members of their communities as demanded by Lebanese authorities.⁵ The co-option of the Popular Committees by the Lebanese state, then, which is enabled by its delegitimation of these same committees, prevents coordinated collective action and ensures that Palestinian settlements are ‘perfectly under the control of the Lebanese state’ (Hanafi, 2010: 28). Indeed, Lebanese governments have a history of exercising control over Palestinian settlements ‘through the PLO’ (Martin, 2011: 160). Informality helps the Lebanese parties that de facto run state agencies to reinforce their power as indispensable brokers between committees that are officially illegal and state agencies that are formally precluded from dealing with them (Stel, 2015).

Syrian gatherings

For Syrian refugees, the absence of any formal shelter policy led to a chaotic assemblage of de facto settlement and residency approaches (Yassin et al, 2015; Nassar and Stel, 2019). Around 80 per cent of Syrians in Lebanon live in mostly substandard housing in urban or peri-urban settings (REACH and UNHCR, 2014). The remainder live in gatherings (Kikano et al, 2021: 431): around 2,000 unofficial, mostly small-scale refugee camps are located predominantly in the Bekaa Valley and North Lebanon’s Akkar region (Ghaddar, 2017; Mencütek, 2019). These are makeshift camps ranging in

size from a hundred to several thousand inhabitants, offering various types of tents and shelters, often made of materials provided by humanitarian organizations (Ghaddar, 2017; Cassani, 2018).

Syrian refugees are paying for this deplorable ‘residency’ themselves. Since they are by and large excluded from legal employment and are therefore severely exploited in the informal sector (Kikano et al, 2021: 448), this encampment has crucially exacerbated their marginalization, for example through the often massive debts that most refugees have been forced to take on to pay for shelter. This is directly related to the informality imposed on them through their lack of refugee status and, largely, residency status too. Lebanon is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and, in contrast to its position on the Palestinians, has not recognized Syrians as refugees, instead designating them as ‘displaced’, which undermines their legal protection (Janmyr and Mourad, 2018). Due to Kafkaesque bureaucracy and high renewal fees, over 80 per cent of Syrian refugees do not have formal residency status either, undercutting their access to services and exposing them to various forms of detention and extortion (Stel, 2020). This combined lack of refugee and residency status and an absence of formal refugee protection spaces in the form of camps makes refugees in informal settlements even more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by landlords.

Lebanon’s ‘no-camp-policy’ for Syrian refugees was meant to signal the expressly temporary nature of Syrians’ stay in the country. As the subsequent emergence of informal camps was entirely predictable, Romola Sanyal (2017: 120, 122) concludes that we should see them as having developed with the ‘tacit approval of the state’ to combine the ‘confinement that is a key feature of camps with the precariousness of informality’. Indeed, while many of these settlements are now over a decade old, their informal and temporary nature is systematically maintained. Built structures are prohibited (Achilli et al, 2018: 27), and service provision is deliberately kept disconnected to maintain the illusion of temporariness and prevent the much dreaded ‘local integration’ of refugees (Kikano et al, 2021).

With their imposed informal nature, these settlements, Sima Ghaddar (2017) concludes, function as ‘sites of experimentation in ad hoc camp management strategies’. They illustrate how informality operates as a disciplinary strategy. This materializes in a very obvious way in the form of continuous threats of eviction and actual evictions (Atallah and Mahdi, 2017; Stel and Van der Meijden, 2018; Stel, 2020). While settlements are widely tolerated by Lebanese authorities – often because they or their networks make good money from them (Lebanon Support, 2016; Cassani, 2018) – and are surveilled and managed in various ways, they remain illegal. This means their residents can always be evicted (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Over 11,000 people were evicted from informal settlements and other forms of collective shelters in 2014 (UNHCR, 2015: 6), and numbers have only increased

since then (UNHCR et al, 2017). Municipalities and security agencies are involved in the vast majority of these evictions (UNHCR et al, 2017; [Human Rights Watch, 2018](#)). This contributes to the marginalization of refugees, as it constitutes a form of ‘containment through mobility’ ([Tazzioli, 2017](#)) that enables authorities to prevent refugees from collective organization and political mobilization through fragmentation ([Nassar and Stel, 2019](#)).

The spatial informalization of refugees – in addition to their legal informalization – also materializes through the securitized forms of indirect rule it facilitates. In Lebanon, Killian [Clarke \(2018\)](#) shows, Syrian refugees have not developed the strong leadership networks needed to support mobilization that have emerged in other Middle Eastern countries that have hosted them. I argue that this is an intended consequence of Lebanon’s approach to the organization of these refugee communities. The fragmentation of Syrian refugee spaces in Lebanon that follows from their informalization allows the Lebanese authorities to undercut the emergence of civic forms of grassroots governance and instead promote more securitized forms of authority in these settlements, which they subsequently co-opt. My research shows that the main institution in these settlements, the *shawish*, has become gradually more exploitative and is informally encouraged and used by Lebanese security agencies but never formally recognized by Lebanese civil authorities ([Stel, 2020](#)).

A *shawish* can be considered as a ‘camp manager’ or ‘superintendent’. The role of a *shawish* varies from one settlement to another and is a mixture of community representative, broker and informant. There is, apparently, virtually no coordination between *shawishes* from different settlements ([Clarke, 2018: 626](#)). They thus operate as a local authority inside a specific settlement but cannot be regarded as part of a more comprehensive representational structure like the Palestinian Popular Committees. *Shawishes* are routinely associated with forms of abuse and corruption such as facilitating forced labour (including children), sexual exploitation and seizing aid. They often benefit from their position economically (through payments from the landlord or extortion from refugees) and socially (being under the ‘protection’ of Lebanese). However, *shawishes* are also – and simultaneously – used and exploited themselves by Lebanese state authorities and landlords ([Ghaddar, 2017](#)).

My research was the first to indicate that the Lebanese authorities do not merely use *shawishes* but sometimes actively install them ([Stel, 2020](#)). Lebanese municipalities have to register Syrian refugees, although national directives do not specify in what way. In practice, they often use *shawishes* to obtain basic information about the inhabitants of various settlements ([Atallah and Mahdi, 2017](#)). Such registration practices have become increasingly securitized and are often implemented by municipalities mostly under pressure from security agencies. The latter do not merely spur municipalities

to surveil refugee communities but also engage with *shawishes* themselves. Lebanese security agencies such as the State Security (Amn al Dawle) and Military Intelligence (Mukhabaraat) use *shawishes* as their ‘eyes and ears’ in Syrian gatherings. *Shawishes* are required to report the names, political affiliations and legal status of the people living in each settlement (Ghaddar, 2017), risking detention and torture if they do not comply.⁶

Security agencies also proactively demand the installation of *shawishes*. Lebanese mayors and landlords have reported instances in which security agencies insisted that they appoint a *shawish* where one did not exist. A mayor explained that he did not work with or allow *shawishes* in the settlements in his municipality. He then recalled how this threatened to spark trouble with the local branch of one of Lebanon’s security agencies, which ordered him to arrange for a Syrian *shawish* in each gathering. In another case, a particular *shawish* was sidelined after a dispute, leaving the settlement in question to operate without one, with the Lebanese landlord collecting rent himself and reporting on the settlement to the municipality. While this arrangement appeared to work for the landlord and Syrian community in question, the municipality apparently insisted on a Syrian *shawish* – a situation that has also occurred in other instances.

In Syrian refugee settlements in Lebanon, other actors apart from the *shawish* play a role in organizing social life, service provision and relations with external actors. These range from more ‘traditional’ authorities deriving their legitimacy from clan or tribal relations to various sorts of ‘committees’ associated with NGOs. These alternative or additional forms of social organization in Syrian refugee settlements, however, appear to be systemically undermined by Lebanese authorities.

Various Lebanese and international NGOs encourage residents of gatherings to form committees, often with the objective of liaising with Lebanese local authorities. Such ‘committees’ have managed to establish relations with Lebanese communities and civil society initiatives. But they have been largely deficient in engaging with Lebanese authorities (Ortmans and Madsen, 2015). This is mainly the result of Lebanese state authorities having forbidden NGOs to facilitate any form of Syrian organization, representation or mobilization (Ghaddar, 2017). In coordination meetings between humanitarian agencies and ministerial representatives, a legal assistance officer recalled, the ministerial representative would ‘put PowerPoint presentations on saying: “we don’t want committees, we don’t want representation, avoid this, avoid that” ... So the message was very clear.’⁷ Municipalities would convey the same message to NGOs, arguing that such committees would undermine Lebanese sovereignty. Lebanese authorities, Yazan Al-Saadi (2014) likewise maintains, are ‘absolute in [their] opposition’ to any form of ‘empowering refugees by having dialogue with Syrian representatives’. Thus, while *shawishes* are not recognized, indeed

are often denounced, by Lebanese authorities, the undermining of other forms or representation in the gatherings by these same Lebanese authorities shows that *shawishes* are nevertheless their preferred instrument of control for these refugee spaces (Al-Masri and Altabbaa, 2016; Carpiet al, 2016; Lebanon Support, 2016).

Reflections: leveraging the local to reveal the disciplinary continuities in spatial informalization

This chapter has sought to make two core contributions to the debate on campsites. First, it has unpacked how spatial informalization can operate as a disciplinary strategy. Various literatures that draw on refugee and urban studies highlight the personal status of residents as a factor that distinguishes between camps inhabited by refugees and settlements populated by marginalized citizens. My analysis contributes to efforts by, for instance, Efadul Huq and Faranak Miraftab (2020: 352) to go beyond this focus on citizenship status to shed light on the related spatial dimensions of informality. Several disclaimers are required at this point. Clearly, neither localization nor informalization is entirely or automatically marginalizing. Decentralization is often constructive and has at times led to more effective and context-specific service provision for refugees. Informalization also generates opportunities for refugees to avoid repressive and exclusive policies and develop effective livelihoods, creative coping mechanisms and meaningful forms of micropolitical contestation (Stel, 2016; Huq and Miraftab, 2020; Kikano et al, 2021; Norman, 2021).

Yet, as my analysis in this chapter has shown, we should also pay attention to the disciplinary effects of these dynamics. They include the undermining of collective action and political mobilization. As Sanyal (2017: 113) notes, ‘the formal classification of camp as a distinct space thus remains important in articulating refugee politics and claims’. This also extends to spatialized understandings of deservingness. Camp dwellers, as Huq and Miraftab (2020: 352) show, ‘are presented in the hierarchy of humanitarian needs as those with purity of claim and innocence’, while residents of informal settlements are often not seen as ‘real’ refugees (Sanyal, 2017: 123) and are more likely to be ‘criminalized, evicted, and persecuted because of their “informal” (read: illegal) housing status’ (Huq and Miraftab, 2020: 352).

The chapter’s second core contribution has been to demonstrate how the combined lens of localization and informalization reveals often disregarded governance parallels and continuities in the governance of campsites that resonate with the rich literature on informality and other forms of apparent ‘non-regulation’ as instruments of governance, control and statecraft (Natter et al, 2023). Lebanon’s spatial responses to the Palestinian and Syrian displacement crises have often been seen as diametrically opposed, from a classic UN-encampment to a rigorous no-camp policy. This perspective

reveals an overfocus on national policy, given that key Lebanese encampment decisions do indeed point in fundamentally different directions for Palestinian and Syrian refugees. An analytical lens focused on informal local realities, however, exposes the problems of this binary imagination of evolving encampment policies. Taking ‘the local’ seriously (Zapata-Barrero et al, 2017), as this chapter shows, allows the significant continuities in the spatial governmentalities generated by Lebanese state authorities in the post-Civil War era to be highlighted. In both cases, spatial informalization allows for a cost-effective control-without-care strategy centred on preventing collective mobilization and political organization and realized through the co-optation of unrepresentative representatives.

As one dimension of a broader – legal and temporal – informalization imposed on refugee communities, spatial informalization legitimizes what Diana Allan (2014: 104) has called ‘malign neglect’. At the same time, it offers reluctant host states instruments to discipline these spaces and communities through marginalization. This resembles the processes that Oren Yiftachel (2009) analysed in other contexts as ‘gray spacing’: the production of spatially confined informalities to enable the indefinite positioning of populations between legality and illegality as a method of control. Spaces such as Lebanon’s gatherings are neither integrated nor eliminated because it is precisely their liminality and ambiguity that makes them functional as instruments for governing unwanted refugee populations (Stel, 2020). Tellingly, Sarah Parkinson (2014) documents how Syrian refugees have turned to Palestinian experiences to learn to navigate the ‘maze’ of informal governance that defines displacement in Lebanon.

Notes

- ¹ Interview with Lebanese analyst, Skype, 18 November 2017.
- ² Interview with development specialist, Skype, 11 December 2017.
- ³ Unpublished document produced by the Central Follow-Up Committee for Popular Committees in Lebanon in 2013, provided to the author in hard copy by a representative of the Central Follow-Up Committee on 29 September 2014. The document consists of various subdocuments and was translated from Arabic by a research partner.
- ⁴ Interview with mayor, South Lebanon, 10 June 2013.
- ⁵ Interview with Palestinian political analyst, Sidon, 12 July 2012.
- ⁶ Interview with former humanitarian field officer, Zahle, 27 February 2018.
- ⁷ Interview with legal assistance officer, Skype, 30 November 2017.

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Unrelated Spaces? Camps and Cities in Jordan and Luxembourg

Léa Lemaire and Lucas Oesch

Introduction

Our chapter uses a relational perspective to examine the reception of refugees in Jordan and Luxembourg. Our case studies are the Azraq refugee camp and town in Jordan and the Diekirch reception centre for asylum seekers and town in Luxembourg. Following Diana [Martin and colleagues \(2020\)](#), we label both facilities as ‘camps’, understood as spatial biopolitical technologies managing displaced populations. The chapter builds on Doreen [Massey’s \(2005\)](#) relational approach to space by questioning the relations between camps and cities. In both case studies, we intend to show that municipal authorities, despite having no official responsibility for refugee reception, play an important role in the daily management of the facilities, their infrastructure and their residents’ everyday lives.

Our aim is to deepen the local turn in refugee studies ([Doomernik and Glorius, 2016](#)) by rethinking the relationship between camps and cities that, in the Global South, has mainly focused on: (1) how the city can be re-created in the camps, largely through the practices of their residents; (2) how camps can be parts of cities; and (3) how the camp can spill over into cities ([Ramadan, 2013](#); [Abourahme, 2015](#); [Martin, 2015](#); [Pasquetti, 2015](#)). In the Global North, the focus has been on (1) bordering processes taking place between reception centres and cities, (2) the exclusion of refugees in cities through restrictive reception policies and (3) the development of camp-like structures to accommodate refugees in various cities ([Darling, 2009a](#); [Fontanari, 2015](#); [Kreichauf, 2018](#)). Much less emphasis has been given to the role of municipal authorities, and our chapter attempts to fill this gap. Furthermore, there has been little dialogue between research carried out

on this topic in the Global South and the Global North. By comparing one case study in Jordan and another in Luxembourg, we attempt to overcome the division in the local turn literature and establish a novel conversation.

To put the local approach across the Global South and North into perspective, we focus on the Azraq refugee camp and town in Jordan and the Diekirch reception centre and town in Luxembourg. We argue that, in both cases, municipal authorities are contributing to building a network of relations between the camp and the city, a network that affects the transformation of both the camp and the city. The involvement of municipal authorities in the daily management of camps has received little scholarly attention. Although some scholars have started to examine the role of municipalities in refugee reception (Hinger et al, 2016; Mayer, 2018; Miellet, 2022), it is frequently assumed that municipal authorities have no involvement in the management of camps, the responsibility for which often belongs to central states and/or international organizations. This chapter aims to go beyond this analysis and show how, across the Global South and North, even in cases where the camp and the urban space seem to be disconnected and ‘unrelated’, municipal authorities play an active role in the management of camps alongside a multitude of other actors.

Our research is grounded in a relational approach to space (Massey, 2005; Darling, 2009b). Space is understood ‘as constituted through interactions’, ‘as always under construction’ and as being ‘never finished; never closed’ (Massey, 2005: 9). Advocates of a relational view argue that space, like time, is a process of becoming, as diverse relations continually make and remake different spaces (Thrift, 1999; Amin, 2002; Massey, 2005). In line with this approach, the chapter aims to explore how the space of the camp is constituted through the interactions which exist with the city.

We use Massey’s conceptualization of responsibilities to analyse the responsibilities that the towns of Azraq and Diekirch assume towards the camp and the reception centre respectively, although the two urban areas have no official role in receiving refugees. Massey’s work (2004) on ‘geographies of responsibility’ questions how we frame responsibilities. A relational account of space argues that responsibilities arise not only through direct actions and implications but also by simply being part of wider systems of injustice and inequality. Massey suggests that we can no longer confine our concern to those relations that are either proximate or fully accountable.

In thinking about the geography of responsibilities, Massey draws on the work of Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd (1999), who define responsibility as follows. First, it is relational: responsibility is ‘being constructed in relation to others’. Second, it is embodied. Third, it implies extension: ‘[I]t is not restricted to the immediate or the very local’ (Massey, 2004: 9). Gatens and Lloyd are interested in extension in time. They question present responsibility for historical events. Their focus is on potential White Australian collective

responsibility towards Aboriginal society for historical events. According to them, understanding how our past continues in our present involves understanding the demands of responsibility. They also argue that we are responsible for our past, not in terms of what we have done but in terms of who we are (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999). Drawing on their insights, Massey poses the following questions: ‘[C]an this temporal dimension of responsibility be paralleled in the spatial and in the present? For as “the past continues in our present”, so [also is] the spatially distant implicated in our “here”’ (Massey, 2006: 94). Massey also draws on the work of Iris Marion Young (2003) on the issue of responsibility. In an article entitled ‘Sweatshops and political responsibility’, Young discusses the responsibility of US consumers towards producers in sweatshops in other countries. Young is also interested in the notion of responsibility with extension, but as Massey points out, ‘in this case the extension is explicitly spatial’ (Massey, 2006: 94). Indeed, Massey is inspired by the difference that Young highlights between responsibility over temporal distance and responsibility in the spatially distanced present. The difference is that reparations for past events identify these moments as ‘abnormal’, such as slavery, the holocaust and the treatment of Aborigines. On the contrary, ‘in the case of political responsibility for present relations, it is precisely often “normality” itself that must be challenged’ (Massey, 2006: 94). For Young (2003) and Massey (2006), there is a need to call into question the normality of many current injustices. For Massey (2007: 206), it is ‘an engaged attempt to rearticulate relations. A way of encouraging a politics, and even more fundamentally a sensibility, that is outward looking. A different kind of geographical imagination.’

Jon May and colleagues (2007: 163), in examining London’s changing ‘migrant division of labour’, draw upon the role of a series of relational connections to define the changing structure of London. They argue that Massey’s spatial extension of responsibility beyond the city is useful in revealing the obligations the city holds to distant others. However, they argue that it is less useful in helping to think through the rather more difficult question of how to address the needs of previously distant others who are now ‘here’ (May et al, 2007: 164). Our chapter goes beyond this limit and shows how municipal authorities, although they often lack any formal responsibility for refugee reception, try to address the needs of distant others now here in the camps. As such, we will look at how municipal authorities attempt to challenge the ‘normal’ injustices that refugees experience while they live in camps.

The chapter aims to contribute to the advancement of literature on the relationship between camps and cities. For a long time, camps and cities have been thought of as distinct spaces in the light of a ‘strict analytical dichotomy’ (Pasquetti, 2015: 702) according to which cities are viewed as an ever-changing and diverse space, while camps are considered as spaces

meant to deal with a specific political reality, such as illegalized migration and refuge (Katz et al, 2018). This dichotomous approach was inspired by Giorgio Agamben's view of the camp as inherently distinct from the city. Agamben understands the camp as a 'space of exception' which includes non-citizens within the state territory and borders while excluding them from its juridical order and the rights this entails (Agamben, 1998: 169). More recently, scholars have sought to move beyond Agamben's vision of the camps by studying camps and cities as entangled environments (Sanyal, 2014; Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, 2019; Oesch, 2020; Katz, 2022), and our chapter seeks to build on this literature. We will show that, both in the Global South and North, the establishment of camps contributes to the indirect involvement of municipal authorities in refugee reception and reconfiguring the links between camps and cities. By taking part in the management of the camps and the reception of refugees, even by indirect means, the municipalities contribute to a form of spatial extension of responsibility.

Methodology

The chapter is based on qualitative fieldwork involving interviews in Jordan and Luxembourg between 2019 and 2021. In Jordan, we conducted more than 20 interviews and informal conversations, mainly focused on the Azraq camp. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff of international, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations, international donors and national and local officials. The research is also based on insights from previous fieldwork we conducted on the reception of refugees in Jordan and especially on the relations between refugee camps and the urban space (Oesch, 2014, 2017, 2020). For the case of Diekirch in Luxembourg, we conducted more than 15 semi-structured interviews with different actors involved in the management of the facility, including nine employees from Caritas Luxembourg¹ (mainly social workers), four government employees (a social worker, an administrator, a director and a divisional director), a municipal employee and a local elected official. We also conducted in-depth interviews with residents of the Diekirch reception centre. Our fieldwork in Luxembourg focused not only on the case of Diekirch but also on seven other municipalities and ten other reception centres for asylum seekers scattered across the Grand Duchy. In total, we conducted around 100 interviews in Luxembourg.²

Case studies

Two case studies will be explored: the Azraq refugee camp and town in Jordan and the Diekirch reception centre and town in Luxembourg. We deliberately chose two case studies situated in highly different contexts, one located in

the Global South and the other in the Global North, in order to establish the global conversation mentioned earlier. However, our aim is not only to compare the Azraq refugee camp in Jordan with the Diekirch reception centre in Luxembourg but also to combine a global with a local perspective. In so doing, we are responding to Massey's invitation not to oppose the study of the global and the local but to combine them and thus to question 'the tendency to counterpose the local and the global' (Featherstone and Painter, 2013: 10). We do this by studying the role of municipal actors in refugee reception in Jordan, in the Global South, and in Luxembourg, which is located in the Global North.

Jordan

Jordan has a population of around 11 million people. Since 2012, it has seen a large influx of refugees displaced by the conflict in Syria, which began in 2011 in the wake of the Arab Spring. As of early 2025, about 535,000 Syrian refugees were registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Of these, about 110,000 lived in three refugee camps.³ The three camps are under the responsibility of the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) set up by the Ministry of the Interior to coordinate the response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Two of them, the Zaatari camp, which opened in 2012, and the Azraq camp, which opened in 2014, are co-managed with the UNHCR, and the third, the Emirati–Jordanian Mrajeeb Al Fhood camp, was opened in 2013 with the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent. Moreover, ten refugee camps established between the late 1940s and 1960s also accommodate about 400,000 Palestinian refugees and are operated by the Jordanian government's Department of Palestinian Affairs in partnership with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The Syrian refugee camp of Azraq is situated in the desert about 85 km east of Amman. The highway leading to the camp from Amman was renewed in 2017. Before reaching the camp, it passes several military areas. The camp opened in 2014 following the arrival of a large number of Syrians in Jordan and currently has around 40,000 residents. It is co-managed by SRAD of the Jordanian government and the UNHCR. Many international and local NGOs, as well as international organizations, provide support and services for the camp. It is completely fenced off and guarded by the military police. It looks rather isolated, and research has shown that security concerns are prevalent in how the camp is organized (Hoffmann, 2017). However, 25 km away to the east is the desert town of Azraq. Official figures put its population at about 10,000 inhabitants. Syrian refugees also live in or near the town, many of whom work in the agricultural sector. Before starting our fieldwork in the town of Azraq, researchers or practitioners said that there was little connection between the camp and the town.

Luxembourg

Much less densely populated than Jordan, Luxembourg is home to around half a million people. Since 2015, it has seen an increase in the number of applications for international protection lodged on its territory. This number has risen from just over 1,000 applications in 2014 to over 2,000 lodged annually from 2015 onwards,⁴ with a drop in 2020 that can be attributed to the difficulties asylum seekers faced in reaching Luxembourg due to the COVID-19 health crisis. Most applicants are accommodated in reception facilities while their applications are examined by the authorities. In the event of a positive response, they become beneficiaries of international protection. The most up-to-date figures show that, at the end of 2023, there were 56 facilities accommodating 4,946 residents (applicants for international protection and beneficiaries of international protection combined).⁵ These facilities are managed by the National Reception Agency (Office national de l'accueil – ONA), a government body under the authority of the Ministry of Family, Solidarity, Community Life and Reception (Ministère de la Famille, des Solidarités, du Vivre ensemble et de l'Accueil). Supervision of the residents was carried out either directly by the ONA or subcontracted to Caritas Luxembourg and the Luxembourg Red Cross.

The Diekirch reception centre is a so-called container village made of modular units situated just outside the town of Diekirch. Diekirch has a population of nearly 7,000 inhabitants and is located in the north of Luxembourg, the most rural part of the country. The reception centre opened in 2016 and was part of a government plan to address the increasing number of asylum seekers arriving in Luxembourg in 2015. The container village accommodates around 300 residents. The facility is under the responsibility of the central state; however, its social management is subcontracted to Caritas. The site is also fenced off and secured by private security guards. The container village was set up on top of a hill, called the Herrenberg, far away from residential housing and next to a military base. On foot, it takes more than half an hour to get from the reception centre to the town, and the path is steep. At the start of our fieldwork in Diekirch, during an informal conversation, a municipal employee referred to the container village as 'the centre situated above'. The employee claimed that, due to the remoteness of the container village, its residents do not interact much with the local population, nor with the municipal authorities.

(Dis)connections between refugee camps and towns

As explained in the presentation of both case studies, the camps are isolated from the urban space and appear disconnected. Yet, we will show that there are numerous connections between both facilities and the urban

space that contribute to weaving a net of relations. Indeed, the various examples we will present attest to the links that have been built between the towns and the camps. These examples will show that the camps are ‘far from being a sanctuary insulated from the outside’ (Iazzolino, 2020: 33). Indeed, camps and reception centres ‘do not exist in perfect isolation from their surroundings’; rather, they ‘are penetrated constantly and in multiple ways by the outside’ (Ramadan, 2013: 70). The camp ‘is fully embedded in broader geographies of power’ (Iazzolino, 2020: 33). As such, it is a space that is ‘shaped by not only the geographies of displacement of the refugee population it hosts, but also the economic and political settings in which they are located’ (Iazzolino, 2020: 27). Understanding the refugee camp as a space of power highlights the fact that it is not a static space but ‘the product of interrelations’ (Massey, 2005).

Although we observed many differences between the Azraq camp and the Diekirch container village – the latter is located in the heart of Western Europe, in a wealthy country, while the former is in the Middle East, in a country bordering Syria whose resources depend in part on international aid – in the remainder of this chapter we will show that, in both our case studies, municipal authorities, although not officially recognized as such, are to some extent key actors in the management of the camps, their residents and their infrastructure. The municipal authorities are indirectly involved in the infrastructure, provision of support and the job market. We will now explore how the municipalities, along with other actors, attempt to address the needs of the camps’ residents in each of these domains.

Infrastructure between the camp and the town

In both Azraq and Diekirch, the camp is located outside the town, and the two kinds of space – the town and the camp – seem to be geographically unrelated. Indeed, in both instances, the road linking the town to the camp is not pedestrian friendly and is instead a marker of an infrastructural separation rather than a connection. It would therefore appear that the management of the town and camp infrastructures is not linked. However, in both cases, we observed connections between the camp and the town in terms of infrastructure management. In Azraq, this is substantiated through links related to waste management and in Diekirch through public transport.

In Azraq, it initially appears that there is not much in the way of relations between the camp and the town, as the camp is officially a closed area, with residents needing permits to leave. An apparent no-man’s-land separates the camp from the town, and the road joining the two places is, as noted earlier, not pedestrian friendly. However, the camp is still linked to the town in other, less visible respects. This is the case when it comes to waste disposal, for example. At the time of our fieldwork in 2019, an international NGO was in charge of

collecting, sorting and disposing solid waste in Azraq camp. An employee of the NGO explained that what cannot be recycled ‘goes to Azraq municipality landfill’ (interview with an NGO employee, Amman, 19 November 2019). The waste was brought to the landfill by a compactor owned by the NGO. The mayor of Azraq explained that ‘they come and bring [the waste], and they pay for that, but the situation exhausted us, we cannot just ignore it and take the waste from the camp to our disposal place’ (interview with the mayor of Azraq, 8 April 2019). Hence, the municipality was paid to allow the use of its landfill, but the mayor also stressed the pressure that this created, which should, in his words, have led to a ‘project to sanitize the landfill for the waste, but this requires a lot of effort and money’. It is also worth noting that, at some point, the waste stopped being brought to Azraq and was instead brought to Zarqa, close to Amman, but much farther away from the camp than Azraq, although it is not clear if this was due to the ‘pressure’ mentioned by the mayor (interview with a donor employee, 24 November 2019).

Furthermore, as mentioned by an employee of an international organization in charge of water and sanitation in Azraq camp, a plan was also envisaged to build a wastewater treatment plant in Azraq town, to which some of the wastewater from the camp could be trucked (interview with an international organization employee, Amman, 21 November 2019), signalling the creation of further ties. At the time of the interview, the wastewater was trucked back to a location close to Amman – so much farther from the camp.

In terms of infrastructure and relations between the camp and the city, all the interviewees mentioned earlier, as well as others, pointed out that in the mid or long term, it was intended that international and non-governmental actors would step back from the management of the camp’s infrastructure, with ‘municipalities coming to the camp providing these services’ (interview with an international organization employee, Amman, 21 November 2019). So not only was the camp related to the town regarding the management of its waste but further ties between the camp and the municipality were also foreseen, up to the direct management of camp services and infrastructures by the municipality itself.

In Diekirch, it is the issue of public transport that highlights the infrastructural links between the camp and the town and municipal authorities. The question of public transport between the camp and the town was raised right after the facility was set up. Residents were free to come and go. Nevertheless, when the camp first opened, access to the town was only possible by means of a few buses during the day. A social worker employed by Caritas, who worked in the container village at the time, told us during an interview:

It was very, very chaotic ... I found myself handing out safety vests to the residents. I wasn't playing the role of social worker at all ... I don't

think there was a bus every hour. So, a lot of people got off on foot and that was new, even for the army [which has a base next to the camp]. They would say your people get off in the middle of the street, you need safety vests because it was winter too. So [laughs] the beginning was very, very, very chaotic. (Interview with a social worker from the Diekirch container village, 24 May 2019)

According to the social worker, when the container village first opened, her task was to distribute yellow vests to the residents who were walking from the centre to the city. Many people would go down on foot, as the bus was not very regular. However, the path is dangerous as there is no pavement, and cars go by fast. Given this situation, residents and social workers complained that the number of buses was insufficient. The municipal authorities recognized their claims and lobbied the Ministry of Mobility and Public Works, which decided to increase the number of buses to two every hour, as explained by a municipal employee in Diekirch during an interview:

For the bus, at the beginning there wasn't a bus line planned there, and there too I said ... well, we also spoke with the Ministry of Transport ... And I said: 'OK, if you are against the bus, you can go up the Herrenberg [on foot] now, it is 2 km from here, and we'll see if ... if you accept like that.' They said no, so ... they also put in a bus line. (Interview with a Diekirch municipal employee, 6 November 2019)

The two infrastructure-related examples show that, in both cases, the municipal authorities were not officially responsible for waste management or public transport from the camps. However, to a certain extent, they acted – in the case of Diekirch – or accepted the situation – in the case of Azraq – so that camp residents could benefit from certain infrastructure. In these two examples, the municipalities are 'thinking space relationally' between their towns and the camps, and they 'present a distinctly spatial account of how we might attend to the responsibilities of the present' (Darling, 2009b: 1939).

Literature on the reception of migrants in cities has shown that local authorities are engaging in municipal activism by developing inclusion policies aimed at countering the restrictive policies of the central state (Fernández-Bessa, 2019; Spencer and Delvino, 2019). However, our two examples do not demonstrate a form of municipal activism. They can instead be understood as a way of assuming certain responsibilities that were not necessarily theirs to begin with. Neither the mayor of Azraq nor the mayor of Diekirch was making any political claims regarding refugee reception on a national scale. Rather, the commitment of the municipal authorities is explained by the reality on the ground with which they were confronted on a daily basis and which led them to address needs that go beyond their

initial mandate. This does not mean that their actions are not political. On the contrary, in line with Massey's thinking, the involvement of the municipal authorities of Azraq and Diekirch in the reception of refugees, and in the management of infrastructure, can be seen as a form of political responsibility that questions 'normal' conditions. 'It is about the challenge of our ongoing, ordinary, constitutive interrelatedness, and thus our collective implication in the outcomes of that interrelatedness' (Massey, 2006: 94). We will now see how the provision of care for refugees goes beyond the borders of the camp to encompass the city and corresponds to what Massey calls a politics of responsibility.

Supporting refugees beyond the boundaries of the camp

Another respect in which relations were established between the camp and the town has to do with support. In both cases, we observed that initially only the camp was responsible for the care of refugees. At first, the town did not have any involvement in their welfare. However, soon support for refugees was also organized in the town, alongside the aid provided in the camp. In Diekirch, a new position of social worker responsible for the care of refugees living in the camp and in the town was created by the municipality. In Azraq, the activities of NGOs initially developed in the camp were later extended to the town with the creation of new organizations and branches in the urban area.

In Diekirch, social support for the residents of the container village is provided by the Caritas team of social workers, which consists of eight employees who work on site every working day. However, when the container village opened, the municipality decided to employ a new social worker. The new position was designed to address the presence of refugees living in the camp as well as in the town. For example, when the position was taken up, the social worker was in charge of recruiting a team of volunteers made up of local citizens to organize activities in the camp, such as French classes.

When we met the municipal employee who was doing this job in 2019, she had been in this position for three years, and her duties had evolved over time. In particular, she tried to assist residents whose asylum applications had been finalized and who had obtained a protected status and therefore had to leave the centre in search of housing:

They still come here to apply for social housing, but after that, once they are on the waiting list, it can take about six, five years ... if I hear someone saying: 'Oh, we have got private housing, do you know anyone [who is looking for a place to rent]?' That way, two or three families ... I have found housing for them. Yes ... with them, I do the

social follow-up, again, because they are no longer living in a reception centre ... But it works very, very well. The owners of the houses and flats are also very happy, because everything's going really well. (Interview with a Diekirch municipal employee, 6 November 2019)

It is difficult for the municipal employee to address the needs of residents with social housing as there is a shortage of social housing in Luxembourg. However, thanks to her knowledge of the city and its inhabitants, she tries to find alternative solutions for the residents of the container village so that they can find private housing. Another of her tasks is to help residents of the container village who are beneficiaries of international protection to prepare applications for the social benefits offered by the municipality:

It's for all the people who don't have a salary like that. Then they get ... a ... benefit from the municipality once a year. So ... it's always around September, October, they can give ... so we calculate all the rents ... all the salaries, minus the people's rent. And what's left, we will see if they are still entitled to help or not. And so, at this point, I see a lot of people from the container village. They are beneficiaries of international protection because asylum seekers are not entitled to claim this allowance. I sent an email to Caritas so that they could let them know. (Interview with a Diekirch municipal employee, 6 November 2019)

In Azraq, we also observed the spill over of support from the camp into the town. Indeed, some NGOs and humanitarian workers who first started working in the camp have since opened branches or created new organizations in the town. For example, we met a former employee of an international NGO who worked in the camp for a few years before deciding to open a local charity in Azraq town providing psychosocial support for both Syrian refugees living there and local Jordanians in the form of various training courses, such as sewing, and awareness sessions on various issues. One of the charity's employees explained that the founder of the charity 'worked three years in the camp and after that she stopped'. He further explained that the charity's founder was working 'with Mercy Corps NGO, after she left the camp, she was planning to do something for Syrian refugees, because she loves that work, and after that, she established the place [in Azraq town]' (interview with an employee of a local charity in Azraq town, 6 April 2019).

While the charity was not created by the municipality, the same employee explained that collaborations with both the municipality and Mercy Corps, the international NGO that its founder used to work for in the camp, are important as they illustrate the web of relations that support initiatives have

created between the camp and the town: ‘It’s very important for me, the cooperation with the municipality, because it’s the only essential official organization that’s placed in Azraq ... We also have cooperation with Mercy Corps organization.’

In both cases, social support for camp residents is provided by one or more NGOs or international organizations working directly on site in the facilities. In addition, in both cases, the existence of the camp has led to the emergence of forms of social support for refugees within the town. These examples illustrate the relations that have developed and continue to exist between the camp and the town. As a result, this relational reading of space and responsibility calls ‘for a political responsibility which reacts to the demands of living in, and through, networked, connected and diverse places’ (Darling, 2009b: 1946). As already mentioned in the case of infrastructure, these examples of connections between the city and the camp regarding social support can also be read in terms of the spatial extension of responsibility conceptualized by Young (2003) and Massey (2004), even though the connections under consideration are not situated on a global scale but between a camp and its nearby town. Indeed, we see the camp and the city as entangled spaces and not as ‘an abstract dichotomy, as they are still often considered’ (Katz, 2022: 16). Following Katz, we view the camp and the city ‘as situated entities with spatial relations which are inseparable from the politics that initially constructed them and continues to evolve with and through their spaces’ (2022: 16). As such, the examples presented earlier illustrate ‘an engaged attempt to rearticulate relations ... that is outward looking’ (Massey, 2007: 206). We will now show that similar attempts are taking place in relation to the creation of job opportunities.

Working inside and outside the camp and the town

In both Azraq and Diekirch, connections between the camp and the town can also be observed regarding work opportunities. In fact, the town, like the camp, can be seen as an economic space from which resources can be extracted. Moreover, the residents of both the camp and the town represent a workforce that can be employed either in the town or in the camp. In Azraq, the mayor has insisted that local labour be employed in the camp, while some camp residents are working in the town. In Diekirch, young people from the camp were employed by the municipality over the summer periods.

In Azraq, the camp and the town are connected in terms of job opportunities. Indeed, many employees of NGOs operating in the camp are residents of the town. The mayor of Azraq says that this followed a request from the municipality, so that the camp could benefit the host community (interview with the mayor of Azraq, 8 April 2019). However, it seems that over time, recruitment from the city became less widespread as ‘many NGOs first hired

young people from Azraq in the camp, after that they stopped' (interview with an employee of a local charity in Azraq town, 6 April 2019). The same employee explained that working in the camp represents an opportunity as, in the camp, 'you know when you work in NGOs, the salary is over 1,000 dollars. In Azraq [town] it's only 400.' Despite this reported decrease in the hiring of town residents to work in the camp, we met a Jordanian family living in Azraq whose mother worked as a teacher for an NGO in the camp while also being part of the Azraq municipal council, and her two sons also worked for NGOs in the camp, signalling that the camp was still an important place in terms of job opportunities for town residents.

Conversely, some camp residents worked in Azraq town. In the framework of the reception of Syrian refugees in Jordan, and before work permits for Syrian refugees were created, specific short-term employment opportunities called Cash-for-Work were established (Lenner and Turner, 2019). In Azraq, one of these schemes, funded by a donor and jointly run by a Jordanian organization and an international NGO, concerned the improvement of green spaces, such as the Azraq wetlands. One employee of the donor who supported the initiative explained that the Jordanian organization was in charge of hiring Jordanians, while the international NGO would hire Syrian refugees. She explained that the international NGO 'had only connections to the camp, so they were bringing the Syrians from the camp to Azraq to work there' (interview with a donor, Amman, 14 November 2019). Furthermore, these economic opportunities were not only benefitting camp residents. Some of the Cash-for-Work initiatives were also developed to directly 'answer a need that was identified by the municipality', such as the setting up of a compost unit in Azraq town funded by the same donor (interview with an employee of an international NGO, Amman, 24 November). In addition, an employee of an international organization involved in the labour sector also explained that there were camp residents working in the agricultural sector in Azraq town and that some of them commuted daily using transportation organized by the *shawish*, a middleman putting camp residents and employers in contact with one another (interview with an employee of an international organization, Amman, 28 November).

In terms of job opportunities, in Diekirch several young refugees living in the reception centre in 2019 had the opportunity of being employed by the municipality in summer jobs. Indeed, every year, young inhabitants of Diekirch have the same opportunity to be employed for the summer period. In 2019, five of these positions were given to residents of the container village, as a municipal employee from Diekirch told us during an interview:

I think there were five teenagers that we took on for summer jobs at the municipality. So ... during the summer, for two months, we can accept about 80 people, and this year we also had five from the container

village. It all went very well too, and that, for me, is also integration. (Interview with a Diekirch municipal employee, 6 November 2019)

According to one of the social workers employed by Caritas in the container village, the allocation of some of these jobs to residents of the centre was the result of a form of lobbying by Caritas with the municipality. He told us during an interview: ‘In the end, we were the ones who pushed’ (interview with a social worker from Caritas, 5 June 2019). As such, it seems that discussions and negotiations took place between the municipal authorities and Caritas staff on this subject, which once again attests to the links that can exist between the centre and the city.

These two examples show that the camp can represent a form of job opportunity for the inhabitants of the town in Azraq, while the municipality can represent a form of job opportunity for the residents of the camp in both Diekirch and Azraq. In both cases, job opportunities were not foreseen in advance. Rather, they were the result of bargaining between the municipal authorities and other actors. They could be understood as ‘zones of negotiations’, which are spatial practices that may serve as stabilizing and ordering mechanisms (Hinger et al, 2016) in refugee reception. In this sense, refugee reception is a form of ‘playing field’ or ‘battleground’ where municipal authorities along with various other actors come together with different interests, values and frames (Campomori and Ambrosini, 2020). Moreover, the examples of job opportunities illustrate well a politics of responsibility according to which ‘the grounds of demands, both “local” and “distant”, should be open to contestation and negotiation in equal measure’ (Darling, 2009b: 1948).

The ‘geography of responsibilities’ between the camp and the town

Although municipal authorities are not directly involved in the management of the facilities, during our fieldwork we noticed their indirect involvement on numerous occasions, especially when it came to the management of infrastructure and the provision of support and work opportunities. The indirect role of municipal authorities can be understood in the light of Massey’s geography of responsibilities (2004, 2006) and is illustrated by the words of the mayor of Diekirch, who stated in an interview that:

[i]n our case, we were never against it [the centre]. On the contrary! Because ... we believe that if there are people who need help and if it can be done, we will provide it ... Well, in my opinion, there has already been a positive impact [of the reception centre on the town], because everyone has seen the need to do it. Otherwise, you’d just see it on TV! (Interview with the mayor of Diekirch, 27 November 2019)

To some extent, the mayor of Azraq felt the same way – he explained that it was not the municipality’s decision to open the camp, but that eventually, as it was there, ‘the refugee camp is now the municipality’s responsibility, so the municipality has to provide services’ (interview with the mayor of Azraq, 8 April 2019).

Our interviews with the mayors of Diekirch and Azraq show that the obligation to take in asylum seekers and refugees was not the result of any form of proximity and did not arise from the mayors’ political mandate; it was explained solely by the need that existed, namely the need to accommodate asylum seekers and refugees in the towns and in the camps (May et al, 2007: 164). The responsibility they evoke is not attributed to spatial closeness but to a way of thinking about space – the space of the town and the space of the camp – from a relational perspective. As Massey (1993: 66) argues: ‘Instead ... of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extra-verted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world.’

The different examples we have presented in this chapter in terms of the management of infrastructure and the provision of support and job opportunities are evidence of a form of responsibility that can be described as relational and is marked by a form of spatial extension. ‘Such a politics is an attempt ... to accommodate and traverse the demands and implications which arise from being connected to, and within, other spaces’ (Massey, 1993: 66). We have shown that, rather than being seen as separate responsibilities of either the camp or the town, demands such as access to infrastructure, care or work have been organized in such a way as to link the camp and the town. As such, following a relational approach to space, the geographical forms of territory and flow cannot be used as our guiding principles. ‘What is really at issue is the politics of the particular situation, it is how these relations and connections are articulated. Responsibility in this model comes to be a demand to intervene in the present ... to contest the current configuration of global flows, territories and injustices’ (Darling, 2009b: 1950). Indeed, the various examples analysed in this chapter demonstrate that the reception of refugees, which was supposed to be limited to the camp space, ended up spilling over into the town and creating a series of relations between the town and the camp.

Conclusion

In both Jordan and Luxembourg, we witnessed the weaving of relations between the camps and the towns in many different domains (for example infrastructure, social support, economic activities), as well as the indirect involvement of municipal authorities in the camps’ everyday management.

Our case studies and research thus invite scholars to reconsider distant and proximate relations when it comes to responsibility. Indeed, in her work on the geography of responsibilities, Massey set out to consider a more global spatial extension of the notion of responsibility. The empirical examples we have selected show how places that are relatively close but seem socially and spatially disconnected turn out to be linked in different ways. Indeed, in both cases, the camp and the town seemed socially disconnected despite being located in the same spatial environment, yet in both cases, we observed numerous connections and relations between the camp and the city, even if they were not always formalized as such.

It is also worth highlighting that even though the municipal authorities in both cases have tried to address the needs of refugees living in camps, those ‘distant others now “here”’ (May et al, 2007: 164) – or have accepted the necessity of doing so – their living conditions have not radically changed. In Azraq as well as in Diekirch, the facilities’ residents live in very precarious conditions and are separated from the local population. The connections between the camp and the town that we observed are mainly related to camp management and, unfortunately, only marginally affect the lives of the camps’ residents. For Massey (2006), thinking about responsibility in relational terms aims at calling into question the normality of many current injustices and seeks to challenge the ways in which others may be cast aside. However, in the two cases studied, the spatial extension of responsibility we observed did not make it possible to achieve these objectives.

Our analysis has also contributed to building a bridge between research on the Global South and the Global North in refugee reception studies that adopt a local approach. Research considering the local from a global perspective is still very limited, and, hopefully, this chapter will help initiate a more systematic dialogue between research on the Global South and research on the Global North. By putting the camp and town of Azraq into perspective with the camp and town of Diekirch, we have shown that there are many similar processes in play in the Global South and Global North. Our work can serve as a basis for developing future work aimed at comparing localized analyses in refugee reception between the two. So, future research could employ a comparative method to cover cases from the Global South and North in order to develop a more global perspective in studying the local.

Finally, our research, which highlights existing links between municipal authorities and camp management, and more generally between the camp and the city, also invites a rethinking of the distinctions between the camp and the city in both research and practice, as it shows that not only is the camp part of the city but that the city is also part of the camp. In doing so, this chapter contributes to the literature focusing on relations between the camp and the city. We have shown that the camp cannot be reduced to a space of

exception. Rather, it is a place where, in collaboration with the municipal authorities and other actors, various forms of politics of responsibility are developed that attempt to challenge the normal state of injustice that exists in the reception of refugees, even if these attempts are not necessarily successful.

Notes

- ¹ Following a financial scandal in 2024, Hellëf um Terrain (HUT) has taken over activities from Caritas Luxembourg.
- ² For more details on the methodology and the results of our research project, please visit our website: <https://refugov.com/>.
- ³ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Refugee Situation, Available from: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36> [Accessed 1 June 2025].
- ⁴ Office luxembourgeois de l'accueil et de l'intégration, Rapports d'activité 2015.
- ⁵ Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes, de la Défense, de la Coopération et du Commerce extérieur, Rapport d'activité 2023, pp 109–110.

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Between the Exceptional and the Ordinary: The Local Turn and the Camp in South Asia

Ankur Datta

Introduction

This chapter explores the local turn in relation to camps by refracting the discussion from the perspective of the Global South. Much of the engagement with camps appears to emerge from the perspective of the Global North, which situates camps as sites of exception and marks their inhabitants as coming from spaces distinct from normal everyday life. However, in the Global South, camps have emerged as sites of local life, even if the lives their inhabitants lead are precarious. In this chapter, I will present the case of the South Asian region within the Global South, eventually focusing on India. Camps have a longstanding presence on the South Asian subcontinent, appearing in a range of forms from refugee to labour and relief camps, often in close contact with mainstream urban areas and sites of economic, social and political life. Camps in South Asia are sites of relief (Vajpeyi, 2007: 4), as opposed to the detention or extermination camps historically seen in Europe. What also emerges across South Asia is a tension between the exceptional qualities of a camp and the ordinary ones as they become sites of habitation and localization and are often absorbed into existing urban spaces.

The first section of the chapter discusses the scholarship on the camp, situating existing imaginations of the camp alongside research that has approached the local turn in refugee studies. Current research has been valuable, but the frameworks and cases I draw upon are reflective of work in Europe and North America. The chapter will then engage with camps in South Asia, as a subset of the Global South, focusing on salient features and tensions in relation to the camp form in the region. The discussion

then moves to two case studies. The first looks at the refugee camps that emerged during the partition of India at the end of British rule. Focusing on the history of camps in two Indian metropolises and drawing on existing scholarship, I show how, though camps may begin as exceptional sites, over a period of contestation they become part of everyday urban life and parts of the city. This will be followed by a second case study drawing on primary ethnographic research I conducted in Jammu and Kashmir. Here, I explore how a camp followed earlier histories by starting out as a site of temporary emergency and how it appeared to achieve permanence in the city of its location, but then, just as permanence was achieved, it was dismantled by the Indian state – which may reflect how the camp form has changed in the region as well. Taking the two case studies together, the chapter will explore the production of camps not as isolated sites but in ways that connect forced migration studies to related fields such as inequality studies and urban studies. It will argue that the camp, by varying in form and in its relation to state authorities, can complicate the ways that displaced peoples are affected by policy and governance in urban areas, which, in turn, appear to be difficult to predict. Rather than being exceptional, camps transform meanings of the local for displaced and non-displaced people alike, which may contribute to new ways of thinking about the local turn in forced migration studies.

Imagining the camp as a site

Whenever we think of camps, a certain kind of image flashes up: of people not fitting in, escaping massacres or heading into annihilation and of material features such as barbed-wire fences (Turner, 2001). The inhabitants of camps vary: from refugees to labour migrants, such as those working on the construction of stadiums in the Middle East (Bruslé, 2012), and from detainees to those seeking shelter from disasters. Across all cases, the camp is tied to biopolitics and the management of difficult populations (Minca, 2015). This connection between different kinds of camps represents an initial tension. From a Foucauldian perspective, where the sovereign is concerned with fostering life or disallowing to ‘the point of death’ (Foucault, 1984: 261), camps can be seen as providing sanctuary and protection and yet, as many cases report, they can also become sites of neglect and loss. In either situation, there is a management of populations that fit into a particular category, namely that of displaced people. Thinkers like Giorgio Agamben draw on the death camp as a *nomos* of the modern world, interrogating the biopolitical undercurrent of camps and the populations forced into them (Agamben, 1998: 166). This approach has been extended further by various scholars, to the point that one can find the camp in unexpected sites in cities, such as where asylum seekers are detained in stadiums, thereby bringing the camp within the mainstream though separate from it (Fassin, 2005; Agier,

2010). The camp need not necessarily be ‘out there’ but can be connected to major population centres.

Scholarship has reflected on the experience of refugees in urban spaces in the Global North. This may extend from the local turn in migration studies, which looks at questions of the governance in European urban spaces of migrants of all kinds, from immigrants to asylum seekers (Van Breugel, 2020). This approach also extends to refugees, insofar as the local turn approaches refugee regimes at the local level and the integration of refugees into a general population in urban settings (Hackett, 2017; Doomernik and Ardon, 2018). The local turn is broadly oriented towards policy and urban planning, discourses around citizenship, cosmopolitanism, the anxieties of belonging, dealing with minorities and integration/separation in the Global North. What constitutes the local? Is it mainly a matter of planning and governance? If the local is taken as an approach to space, it refers to sites that are constantly produced by inhabitants in response to various situations and pressures (Appadurai, 1998) or as contexts in which meaning and structure emerges for human life (Fine, 2010: 356). Extending this approach to urban spaces, the city is seen as a site constantly worked upon by different populations, including the displaced. Research also speaks of the city as not merely a site of integration but as one of everyday resistance, which reconfigures migrants as integral to urban spatial politics (see Hall, 2015). An example of this is Maximiliaan camp in Belgium, which emerged in the national capital as a demonstration site for migrants and refugees, facilitating encounters between citizens and non-citizens (Depraetere and Oosterlynck, 2017).

Forced migrants lead lives marked by continuous dispersal across nation-states, regions and even within an urban setting. As Jonathan Darling (2021: 895) argues, the experiences of migrants and their subjectivities and demonstrations of agency interact with policy to produce an understanding of displaced people in urban spaces. If this is extended to other categories such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), the question of the urban becomes even more complicated as they are not non-citizens. Camps can also become tied to several sites, especially for those who face protracted displacement such as Tibetan refugees who sustain their communities by working as itinerant traders, thereby connecting several urban sites across regions to the camp (Basu, 2016). Much of what has been discussed draws on studies set in Europe. In the following sections, I will now approach the Global South and the case studies from South Asia.

Approaching camps in the Global South

Thus the camps are not markedly different from many villages, especially since the majority of refugees have constructed mud houses

to replace their original tents ... In the camps one does not see men dispersing into the fields each morning but, rather, queuing up to receive rations at one of the distribution points or squatting outside the camp commander's tent waiting to make a grievance ... Nothing else dramatic tends to occur in the camps. (Edwards, 1986: 321)

In this excerpt from an article on Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, David Edwards explores the process of adjustment experienced by the refugees. What features prominently is the camp itself, which is, on the one hand, an unusual setting and, on the other, somewhat reminiscent of a village. This process is witnessed across a range of cases in West and South Asia, where camps are distinctive sites that embody a biopolitical imperative in relation to a vulnerable population and yet are sites of habitation with implications for understanding the local.

The Global South has witnessed displacements of populations in various forms. Alongside those escaping violence and persecution, there have been numerous cases of internal displacement caused by development projects or a need to escape violence. Liisa Malkki's (1995) seminal study on Hutu refugees demonstrated how the camp enabled the formation of identity and community, which did not happen for refugees located at the margins of urban areas. Some camps may be separate from other populations and settlements, whereas others may be porous, being located within urban areas. Scholarship on Palestinian refugees shows how refugee settlements in the West Bank and Gaza have close connections to Israel for purposes of work, thereby becoming parts of urban spaces in practice (Marx, 1990), though these relationships are marked by political and socio-economic inequality between Israelis and Palestinians. As scholars such as Adam Ramadan (2010, 2013) and Ilana Feldman (2015) demonstrate in their work on Palestinian refugee camps, inhabitants may engage with an economic world outside, but it will be as a source of exploitable labour with limited rights, and they remain vulnerable to physical and structural violence. Nevertheless, the point I am trying to make is that scholarship across the Global South shows that camps and other forms of settlement associated with displaced people are often in close connection to and incorporated within urban spaces.

For scholars who have worked extensively among Palestinian refugees across West Asia, such as Julie Peteet, the camps may involve difficult conditions but are simultaneously 'landscapes of hope and despair' (Peteet, 2005). Displaced populations may also spread across areas beyond camps as seen in the case of IDPs in Peru who survived through prior networks that facilitated seasonal migration for work (Stepputat and Sørensen, 2001). However, mobility and survival remain critical when displaced peoples have to negotiate with agencies such as the state or international organizations (Feldman, 2008). In some cases, the displaced may lack immediate agency,

especially in the context of development projects such as dam construction in China and India which led to people being displaced, even if a state has a plan of resettlement (Jing, 1996; Baviskar, 1995). Displaced peoples also remain vulnerable if their settlements are areas where cheap marginal labour can be sourced or are exposed to conflict, as in the case of camps such as Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, where massacres took place during the Lebanese Civil War.

Furthermore, such experiences may not be confined to the camp form when refugees are found elsewhere. The recent experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, for example, show how the Lebanese state discourages the establishment of camps even if refugees are permitted in informal settlements. Hence, as Romola Sanyal (2017: 122) points out, scholarship must acknowledge that a policy of not enabling camps is also followed by states that are hosting displaced populations. This means that states suspend the law for non-citizens and allow local power brokers to create informal settlements for refugees (Sanyal, 2017: 122; Oesch, 2020). This may also lead to formations such as the Orangi project in Karachi, Pakistan, which started off as a refugee camp after the partition of India and then attracted rural migrants and refugees from Afghanistan, eventually becoming the largest slum in Asia (Ghosh, 2014: 32). In the following sections, I will begin with the camps that emerged in India during the partition following the end of colonial rule. I will then draw upon my earlier ethnographic work from Jammu and Kashmir which looked at an internally displaced population and one camp in particular.

Urban camps during the Indian partition

The partition of what had been India into India and Pakistan following the end of British rule in South Asia in 1947 was an event whose effects are still being experienced. Accompanied by mass violence between different faith communities, the partition witnessed one of the largest exchanges of populations in the world, affecting almost 15 million people. Much of the framing of refugees as a biopolitical category in South Asia came into practice with the partition. Narratives of the partition are notable for their urban setting. The massacres often took place in urban centres, establishing a link between mass violence and cities as in the ‘Great Calcutta Killings’. The departure and arrival of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs also resulted in significant demographic transformation and expansion of cities such as New Delhi and Karachi.

Historians regard the partition as foundational for contemporary New Delhi, since large numbers of the city’s population left to be replaced by Hindus and Sikhs from West Pakistan, who often came to camps within the city. One of the main camps was Purana Qila, an old fort now protected as

a heritage site, that served first as a transit camp for Muslims leaving India and Hindus and Sikhs arriving from Pakistan (Rajagopalan, 2016). Many refugees were also initially housed in barracks built during the Second World War to accommodate military personnel stationed in India (Mehra, 2013). While markers of these camps remain in present-day New Delhi, many refugee neighbourhoods emerged in what were, at the time, the outskirts of the city and are now densely populated localities. The Indian state sought to accommodate refugees while maintaining a particular plan of the city as the capital of a new nation-state. As a result, refugee spaces were absorbed in the larger plan (Mehra, 2013). While this emerged from urban policy, there was some resistance from refugees, who did not want to move to distant colonies; the authorities sometimes had to persuade or even coerce people to move. Certain features of the plan also reflected societal ideologies, such as the establishment of a widows' colony as a site of care while keeping a stigmatized population separate, or providing poor Dalit refugees with poorer-quality housing (Kaur, 2009, 2014).¹

Another Indian city which features in partition narratives is Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). Shaped by movement between India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the partition in the East was a process that continued for many years, with a steady stream of refugees crossing the border until Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971. Kolkata witnessed significant demographic change and an expansion of the city's limits. Sealdah station, which remains an important railway station in Kolkata, became synonymous with refugees, being their first port of call and place of shelter in the city, a kind of transit camp. The overcrowding on the platforms in the station, where refugees were sorted and dispatched by state refugee rehabilitation agencies, also resulted in hostility from locals. Nevertheless, many refugees stayed on for as long as they could, to some extent with the permission of the state (Sengupta, 2021). The pre-eminent form of refugee habitation was seen in the 'squatter colonies' located on what were the outskirts of the city in 1947 but are now part of the urban mainstream. There is a history to the colony as a concept and category in policy in South Asia. This goes back to the transformation by the colonial state of areas mapped as rural wastelands into 'colonies' as spaces of settlement and agricultural production beginning in the late 19th century in the Punjab (Agnihotri, 1996). While more research will be required to establish a direct connection between this process from colonial history with forced migrants in the region from the mid-20th century onwards, it is interesting to see how the word colony is used in everyday parlance, often in relation to areas inhabited by forced migrants in India. The squatter colonies, or *jabar dokhol* as they are known locally, in fact emerged in areas of the city that were deemed uninhabited and uncleared, until the arrival of refugees ostensibly becoming colonized. They took shape when groups of refugees started squatting in certain areas and slowly building

up their homes from basic huts to more permanent structures (Chatterjee, 2007; Sanyal, 2009). While Kolkata was an important metropolis, refugee spaces were not taken into account in the sort of planning that marked New Delhi. The squatter colonies were sites of contestation between refugees and the state, with the latter trying to control their spread. In Nilanjana Chatterjee's (1992) PhD thesis, state functionaries were critical of refugees, whereas the refugees saw themselves as making sacrifices for the new Indian nation-state and hence being entitled to make claims upon it. There was a long period of tension until a process of recognition and regularization of the colonies as part of the city and municipal structure began.

Refugees engaged with life in the city at different levels. Sociologist Manas Ray (2002: 155) describes how one colony in Kolkata started off as a wasteland developed by refugees from different parts of East Bengal, who segregated on the basis of caste and resisted violence from landlords and criminals, to which the city administration retained an ambiguous attitude which resonated with colonial urban regimes. Eventually, as refugees became residents of the city, they became owners of the land in the area Ray writes about, which is now a middle-class locality. Another squatter colony in Kolkata, established by refugees who lacked social and cultural capital, was built alongside a commuter railway track and started to take in poor migrants to the city from the countryside, thereby becoming an area for all the marginal people in the city. For Partha Chatterjee (2004: 53–6), who uses this case to discuss political society, such settlements are critical to understanding how people on the socio-economic margins became part of the quotidian politics of the city.

If the local turn is seen in relation to urban governance, the refugee settlements in Kolkata are interesting sites that can be used to explore it. But that requires a wider sense of what governance involves in relation to refugees and other marginal groups. If refugees from the partition are seen as what Chatterjee (2004) refers to as 'nominally rights-bearing citizens', then the local turn sees governance as a series of negotiations between the state and the contours of everyday political life. Inter-group relations are another site worth exploring, and, as Sanyal (2014) points out in the case of Kolkata, partition resulted in displacements of Muslims: refugees who headed to East Pakistan as well as people who did not become refugees but moved into areas where their co-religionists could be found in India. In turn, pressures from refugee settlement expansion on these areas, where Hindus lived as part of the national majority in India, contributed to further segregation in the city. These different directions reveal the complex relations between urban centres and refugees, with sites and people being mutually produced. In the next section, the chapter will deal with another case of a camp, this time in a non-metropolitan setting, which further complicates the urban encounter for displaced people.

A beginning and an end: a camp in Jammu and Kashmir

It was late afternoon in Purkhu camp. I was outside on the camp road heading to a friend's quarters when a boy I knew ran past me. He noticed me and stopped, asking if I was coming to the camp community centre. He said that some *netas* (leaders) had come to the camp to run a hepatitis vaccination campaign. When I replied that I had already been vaccinated, he said 'Come anyway. You will get another one for free.' When I reached the community centre, I saw people had been queuing for their turn just outside the building. Others stood socializing, while children played in the grounds of the hall. Soon, a voice on a sound system asked everyone to be quiet, which was followed by a lecture from a community activist standing on a makeshift dais next to the hall, explaining their work as a vital service and an attempt to build connections with the community.

This experience took place towards the end of my doctoral fieldwork in 2007, after spending a year and half in Jammu among displaced Kashmiri Hindus, better known as Kashmiri Pandits. Displaced from their homes in 1989–90 following the outbreak of conflict in the Kashmir valley in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, most of the population took sanctuary in places south, in cities like Jammu. A significant section of this population, who are officially labelled as 'migrants', the state's nomenclature for displaced persons, were sheltered in camps that were set up in 1990 and operated until their closure in 2011.

The camps began as tented affairs across the city, transforming in a few years into colonies of one-room tenements (ORTs), a 9 x 14 ft room made of brick and with a tin roof. The number of camps would also be reduced over the years with populations being consolidated in a single township called Jagti, established in 2011. The local here can be read in different ways. 'Local', on the one hand, would often refer to communities from Jammu in contrast to the Pandit 'migrants'. On the other hand, the local could be seen in relation to place and habitation. The presence of around 36,000 registered families in Jammu city can be seen in the emergence of new neighbourhoods across the city along with the camps mostly populated by Pandits. As a result, the camps were not isolated but were part of the cityscape. The camps were managed by the state, with low-level state officials serving as camp commandants responsible for the upkeep of the site, the registration of inhabitants and the distribution of aid. While these were spaces managed by the state, visitors could freely enter the camp. The migrants were allotted quarters for which they had to register. I had come across quarters whose original occupants had left the camp but had informally passed the space on to those who needed it. There was a limited presence of prominent non-governmental organizations in the camp. However, community charities

would visit the camp and run programmes such as skill sharing with women, running a computer centre to teach basic computing skills or holding events like the one I described at the beginning of this section.

Purkhu camp, my main site, was located along a highway. It was a short bus ride from the city centre, close to many neighbouring settlements and villages. The camp was set up in three phases alongside a road that broke from the highway. The ORTs were arranged in lanes that connected to this road. Many of the shops built by camp residents, as well as temples and the commandants' office, were accessible through the road, which also served as public space where people would meet and socialize. What was interesting was that the road constituted the camp but also led to non-camp spaces. Right in the middle of the camp were establishments such as a hall rented out for weddings and similar events, fast food shops and an educational institution that belonged to a neighbouring settlement whose land jutted into the camp seamlessly, thereby attracting other people to the area. The road was constantly plied by traffic, including the minibus service to and from the city centre which featured the camp as a terminal point.

The camp was in a continuous state of making. It began as a colony of tents in 1990; the ORTs were built in 1994. Later camp residents would erect walls in front of their ORTs to incorporate more space beyond the main unit, providing a compound for a household. It was not uncommon to see residents create small patches of soil for plants and build storage spaces and small kitchens in the compounds. Hence one encountered thriving households. By the time I began my research, more than ten years of the camp had passed and thus a constant process of repair and maintenance of the ORTs, and consequently of the camp itself, by the residents. A place that had emerged in an emergency to house a displaced people became a part of the city and came across as a neighbourhood and a place for everyday social life (see [Datta, 2017](#)).

In 2011, the camps were shut down and the populations consolidated in a new township called Jagti. Located on the outskirts of the city, Jagti consists of blocks of two-storeyed apartment buildings that were seen as an improvement, with bathrooms and kitchens, and resembled any state-built apartment housing project. However, when people moved to Jagti, many connections and relations that had been built up in Purkhu were broken. Hence, I met some people mourning the camp even though conditions had been hard there. During my visit to Jammu in 2012, I found Purkhu camp mostly empty. The lanes were strewn with broken bricks as the walls built by residents were torn down. The ORTs, however, were yet to be demolished. Though empty, they still bore the names of their occupants, while other traces of a past could still be seen in old notices on ORT walls. In 2017, during a visit to Jammu, I saw how another camp became a construction site for apartment complexes built for the market. As [Yolanda Weima and](#)

Claudio Minca (2021: 15) argue, the possibility of camps closing involves a consideration of sovereign power as well as affecting the way camp life develops for its inhabitants. In the case of the camps in Jammu, there was an awareness of its eventual closure at some point in time. Yet when the shift to Jagti happened, there appeared to be a sense of surprise, alongside a realization that the move involved being uprooted again. What appeared to have become a place of life and an urbanscape built over the years had come to an end.

Connecting the cases

The two cases involve camps from cities in Indian-administered territories. They represent situations where camps for displaced people are extremely visible, especially in relation to the urban. Across partition camps and settlements and the Kashmiri Pandit camps, there is uniformity of form: a population displaced in the context of violence has been brought together and exists through a mixture of state support and informal economic and political processes. In both situations, camps and other settlements emerged through the interaction of the state as a primary source of support and recognition with informal social, political and economic arrangements. After partition, there was gradual absorption into the city. In New Delhi, the emphasis on planning led to a process of shutting down relief camps, coercing and persuading refugees to move into new areas developed by the state, which, over time, developed their own dynamics as refugees became part of the city. In Kolkata, the potential for conflict was much greater as the squatter colonies were sites of conflict and resistance to the state, which eventually ended with their recognition. Over the years, camps, colonies and the refugees became a part of the city, witnessing the arrival of other migrants.

A similar process seems to have taken place in Kashmiri Pandit camps, though these camps were entirely under the state's control. There was an initial sense of how, like other displaced persons' settlements in the past, seemingly exceptional camps became ordinary over the years. However, in this case the closure of the camp by the state and continued dependence suggest a shift, at least in South Asian contexts. The tension between the ordinary/exceptional and temporariness/permanence in the case of the Pandit camps was a sign of a shift whereby refugee spaces could now be effaced from urban connections. The displaced, even if they were ostensibly citizens or if their claim to belong to the nation-state was not questioned, appeared to lack total autonomy in relation to state policy, which intended to shut the camps down in favour of a separate township.

The experiences of displaced peoples in India vary in terms of their presence in urban spaces. Tibetans are officially recognized and are often seen across different cities as traders, able to negotiate international networks

(Frechette, 2002). The emergence of the relief camp in the context of violence was also observed during the inter-community riots of 2002 in the state of Gujarat and in New Delhi in 2020 (Ajmal and Ibrar, 2020). What was striking in these camps was the seeming lack of support from state agencies and a dependence on community organizations, though eventually they required recognition from the state. The camps in New Delhi were forcibly disbanded by the state with the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, while in Gujarat some camps have become permanent settlements and are now described as slums (Dhar, 2022). This indicates a change in the form of the camp, especially in relation to populations that are subject to economic and political marginalization. What the cases from India show is a gradual shift, where the response of the state is either violent or one of neglect, rather than one of imperfectly sustaining life.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to explore the camp and settlements for people displaced by violence and conflict in relation to the urban. In scholarship emerging from and relating to the Global North, there has been an interest in the local turn, with an emphasis on urban space, governance and a managed absorption of refugees, possibly set in the context of concerns/anxieties about immigration and multiculturalism. There has also been a persistence in imagining refugee spaces as spaces of exception. In this chapter, I have considered how cases from the Global South offer another way of looking at things in which there is a tension in refugee camps and settlements, but insofar as they exist in a variety of forms shaped by a tension between the ordinary and the exceptional, temporariness and permanence, formality and informality in their absorption into urban spaces. What marks these sites is that the framework is one of relief as opposed to one of direct segregation. The state figures here as an institution that seemingly allows for a range of possibilities for approaching the local and issues of space and place, even if populations remain socio-economically vulnerable and subject to local and regional politics. The chapter then tried to focus on South Asian situations, specifically drawing on cases from the Indian partition and displacement in Jammu and Kashmir.

The camp as a form is extremely diverse within Indian-administered areas. They have been a feature of urban spaces and remain critical to exploring the local. This is in contrast to the history of camps and settlements for refugees and displaced persons in the Global North, where there is an emphasis on segregation and exception. Nevertheless, the cases I draw upon suggest that absorption into the urban can no longer be taken for granted, and the state and concerns about sovereignty are important. It is necessary to point out that the populations I have been considering are those whose claims to

citizenship are not doubted by the Indian state and polity. By contrast, the situation for minorities subject to majoritarian politics or those who are rendered illegal (and hence vulnerable) is different; in those cases, the state's violence or neglect is embodied in the camp. Recent examples are indicative of the future for settlements associated with forced migrants whose place in cities in India and elsewhere in the Global South can no longer be taken for granted. As a result, approaching the local turn in these regions must be attuned to changing state policies, negotiations between state agencies and vulnerable populations and an acknowledgement of uncertainty and contingency as a principle of urban life.²

Notes

¹ Caste remains a primary source of social inequality and is a principle of hierarchy in all Hindu societies. The Dalits occupy one of the most marginalized positions in this hierarchy.

² I wish to thank Lucas Oesch and Léa Lemaire for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. Any shortcomings remain my own.

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Welcome to the Bubble: Governing the Parisian ‘Migration Crisis’ from the Street to the Centre de Premier Accueil

Melora Koepke

Introduction

Since 2015, hundreds of makeshift encampments inhabited by unauthorized migrants have proliferated in the north-eastern arrondissements of Paris, both in residential neighbourhoods and certain ‘vacant’ interstices of the city. These provisional clusters of tents and tarps have burgeoned along the medians of the boulevards, along sidewalks, in local parks and squares and on the *quais* of waterways, tucked beneath bridges over the canals and under the flyovers of the *boulevard périphérique* (ring road). These encampments – or ‘informal living areas’ as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sometimes call them – are installed, removed and reinstalled in an endless cycle of creation and destruction often reported by both local and international press. They have been said to constitute visceral evidence of a so-called ‘Parisian migrant crisis’ (Gagnon, 2016) that is controversial because of its visibility – the sheer number of people abandoned by the state to sleep on the streets – and for the spectacle of repeated decampments or *démantèlements* (demolitions, dismantlings) that have helped to name and frame the ‘crisis’¹ as an emergency to be managed (Koepke and Noûs, 2020; Guilbaud et al, 2022) rather than a violation of human rights, social-justice principles and international law. In May 2016, in response to this perceived crisis, Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo announced that she would create a ‘humanitarian’ facility (Mouillard, 2016) and later spoke of inventing ‘new *dispositifs* to

overcome the current situation, which is one of saturation of the facilities of the national state and our collective will' (Ville de Paris, 2016).

On 10 November 2016, exactly six days after the largest evacuation and *démantèlement* to date, where over 2,000 people were removed from an encampment under and around the northern aerial metro near Stalingrad and Jaurès stations, the Centre de premier accueil Paris-Nord (CPA) opened its gates in Porte de la Chapelle, in the north-eastern corner of the 18th arrondissement, just inside the *boulevard périphérique* south of the northern *banlieue* of Seine-Saint-Denis. Though Hidalgo had previously anticipated housing and shelter in a facility 'built to UN standards and norms' (Baumard, 2016), nothing about the CPA or its architectural centrepiece known as 'la Bulle' (the Bubble) suggested the workaday structure common to conventional United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-style transit camps.

This chapter considers the CPA as a unique municipal *dispositif* created to manage the 'undesirables' (Agier, 2011) designated by the so-called 'crisis' of migration in Paris through a camp-like structure that was not located in the peripheries of the global or urban landscapes, as per Michel Agier's formulation, but rather within the city limits of Europe's most visited city. In the national and European context of restrictive border regimes, also marked by a saturation of accommodation facilities for migrants arriving in France, I argue that the CPA was created not only as a welcoming structure but also as a form of *crisis urbanism* meant to position the city of Paris as a municipal-humanitarian actor with the creation of 'new *dispositifs*' (as per Hidalgo's announcement) to manage the local manifestations of a pan-European, or global, 'crisis' of migration (New Keywords Collective, 2016). The mayor's stated 'duty of humanism' (Ville de Paris, 2016) was actualized by the imperfect *accueil inconditionnel* (unconditional welcome) proffered by the CPA, which was itself a material and symbolic intervention into a 'crisis' whose mitigation was not strictly within local competencies. Thinking with Michel Foucault's concept of a *dispositif*— something having generative capacities beyond its role as an 'apparatus' of governance — this chapter interrogates the character of the CPA's *accueil inconditionnel* and considers its political possibilities and foreclosures from within the current 'crisis' of migration in Paris by asking not only what a *dispositif* is but what it *does*. I conclude that the CPA, rather than being a straightforward form of emergent municipal humanitarianism through which migrants' movements, mobilities and presences could be disciplined, governed and controlled (Varsanyi, 2006; De Genova, 2015; Collins, 2016; Darling, 2017; Darling and Bauder, 2019; Jirón, 2019), was both the progenitor and mechanism of a *crisis politics* whose affective, material and discursive properties shaped and were shaped by its very conditions. By engaging with the CPA as a specific case, I interrogate the nature of this emergent form of municipal humanitarianism

and consider crisis urbanism as a political force in and of cities. Drawing from these experiences and subsequent analysis, I argue that various aspects of the *dispositif* – its architectural form, bureaucratic functioning and the discourse around its political positioning – worked strategically to mediate and shape the ‘crisis’ by framing the situation of migrants’ encampments first as a ‘humanitarian’ crisis rather than a failure of the state, positioning the municipality vis-à-vis the national state as a humanitarian actor intervening in this crisis and working to position the municipality as an arbiter of the emergent relations between migrants, Parisians and the state.

This analysis is drawn from ethnographic research in situ at the CPA and its surroundings for the entire duration of its existence. As a volunteer with a citizen-run humanitarian organization that participated, within the first year, in running the centre’s day-to-day operations while also doing outreach and ground support in surrounding encampments, I spent over 1,000 hours in and around the site as an ‘insider-outsider’, accessing the CPA through the sustained presence of my labour and participation. I also conducted 59 interviews with various stakeholders including municipal actors, employees, volunteers and migrants. Fieldwork took place in Paris from August 2016 until July 2018, with multiple subsequent follow-up visits from 2019 to 2022.

The CPA as crisis urbanism

What is the dispositif?

Though the cycle of encampments, their installation and *démantèlement* seemed to indicate governmental ambivalence towards migrant encampments in Paris, in the announcements leading up to opening day, the CPA purported to offer *accueil inconditionnel* to new arrivals, and, indeed, a sign mounted on the fence directly in front of the Bulle proclaimed *bienvenue* (welcome) in eight languages. The same signage identified the facility as the Centre Humanitaire Paris-Nord/Dispositif de premier accueil – *dispositif* being the term that, more than *espace* (space) or even *lieu* (place), is commonly used in French to refer to a physical but also medico-social facility. It is a very common term. In the course of living and working in France, I have heard it used to refer to everything from state-run services for the homeless to new parking meters. However, critical theory has also long engaged with the *dispositif* as a concept (Deleuze, 1992; Agamben, 2009; Bussolini, 2010; Legg, 2011) that was initially described by Foucault as a ‘formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need’ (Foucault, 1980: 184) and:

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and

philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. The apparatus [*dispositif*] itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (Foucault, 1980: 194)

In his subsequent commentary on Foucault's initial conceptualization, Gilles Deleuze (1992) laments that the previous focus of thinking around the *dispositif* was on its governmental function rather than its generative capacity. My use of this term, alongside my French interlocutors (who use it liberally), assumes that the word refers as much to a 'system of relations' as to a physical facility – and that the purpose of the *dispositif* is always political as well as pragmatic (Foucault, 1980). My analysis echoes Deleuze in demonstrating that this particular *dispositif* did more than manage a set of already existent relations; it also shaped an emergent relational politics within and around this particular 'crisis'.

If a *dispositif* 'always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation' (Agamben, 2009: 3), the CPA's strategic function evolved over time. While it was created to govern the 'crisis' of encampments by (supposedly) providing a worthy alternative, it also generated a 'system of relations' through which the crisis was perceived as a result of migrants' bodily, corporeal presence – and that of their material possessions, shelters and so on – rather than the incapacities and insufficiencies of the state since the *dispositif* existed as a way of naming and framing the crisis and defining it in a certain way, while also laying out certain possibilities for intervention. Similarly to the way Stefan Le Courant describes the border as a '*dispositif* that articulates [certain discourses] through which irregular foreigners are treated through a set of coercive practices as well as administrative and judicial procedures' (Le Courant, 2016; translation mine), I argue that the *dispositif* of the CPA has a disciplinary function that operates through 'coercive practices' but is also inherently *generative*, that is, it 'belong[s] to the process of "becoming"' (Deleuze, 1992: 164). In my account of the CPA, I attend not only to what the *dispositif* is but what it *does* – namely its capacity to simultaneously shape and govern the crisis by conjugating relations between diverse subjects and between individuals and the state. I emphasize that it is a socio-spatial structure that governs the existing crisis but also generates new political possibilities; it affirms itself as improvisatory and emergent, one of the 'diverse sites and practices in a piecemeal and contingent way in response to a dynamic and changing world' (Braun, 2014: 51). I also build on work that 'clarifies the usefulness of the Foucauldian notion of *dispositif* for analysing institutional improvisation' in the 'permanent temporary' of urbanizing space (Oesch, 2020: 351).

As an ultra-visible, experimental municipal intervention into the crisis posed by burgeoning encampments in the city, the CPA extended a 'welcome' to many migrants abandoned by the national state's immigration

programmes and asylum procedures. By initiating this ‘new *dispositif* to encounter the current situation’, Paris mayor Hidalgo also significantly leaned into an intensifying impasse between herself and the national government (de Ravinel, 2018). Throughout 2017, as the ‘migrant crisis’ intensified in Paris, Hidalgo repeatedly challenged the nation-state about its unwillingness to increase capacity or adequately manage the situation that was fomenting around the CPA. In 2017, after suggesting that the CPA was an experiment that, if successful, could be taken over by the French government and expanded to meet the increased numbers of asylum seekers arriving in France, she proposed a new law for the reception and integration of migrants to then-Minister of the Interior Gérard Collomb (Fouteau, 2017). In the meantime, the Office française de l’immigration et de l’intégration (OFII) had integrated operations inside the CPA, which prevented any possibility that the centre would really be offering an unconditional welcome.

Migration crisis as urban crisis

Although immigration policy has long been considered the purview of nation-states, the everyday politics and practices of migration reception are increasingly felt and lived locally (European Commission, 2017). Municipalities have long sought innovative solutions to address the pressures and controversies of the so-called ‘European migration crisis’ at the urban scale (Darling, 2017; Bhagat, 2021; Bonn, 2022). Though conventionally thought of in terms of global geopolitics, the pressures and tensions of unauthorized migration are often manifested in encounters between people brought into close proximity in the public spaces of local neighbourhoods where the abstractions of ‘fortress Europe’ become everyday realities for residents and migrants alike. In Paris, this ‘crisis of migration’ is largely constituted as an urban ‘crisis’ through the material presence of tents and bodies of unhoused migrants inhabiting public space, largely visible through the encampments that have burgeoned in the north of Paris, while their inhabitants often remain abandoned by the state and subject to the abjection of encampment life for days, weeks, months and even years while they simultaneously endure the slow violence of an inefficient and outdated immigration bureaucracy (Fassin, 2011; Le Courant, 2016). Reports of increased flows or influxes of unauthorized migrants into cities highlight everyday local migration ‘crises’ that are governed at the municipal level despite the methodological nationalism of the most conventional political understandings of migration (Maillet et al, 2017). Thus, migration becomes an issue through which ‘the nation-state is entwined with the city, relationally constituted through the city, but not necessarily above or before it’ (Darling, 2017: 16). Consequently, municipal governments are responding to pressures of forced migration as they are manifested on the local scale through urban

‘crisis conditions’ that must be addressed through policy and governance solutions. For example, certain ‘quick fixes’ that are meant to address what are perceived to be the *urban* issues of mass displacement are sometimes ‘downloaded’ or transferred from the nation-state to the municipal level, causing cities to become involved in shaping migration policies along with, and in some cases in lieu of, the state (Koepke, 2022). This has been the case in many European cities, and in Paris – where encampments are a persistent controversy – the municipal government has put migration squarely on their agenda (Bonn, 2022). Even before the ‘migration crisis’ heightened the visibility of precarious migrants in Paris, a growing literature on the urban geopolitics of migration was emphasizing the role of cities as first points of arrival, transit hubs and destinations for migrants. Consideration of how the ‘migration crisis’ manifests in urban space causes a paradoxical question of scale to emerge: in Paris, the local framing of the ‘Parisian migration crisis’ as a municipal issue deflects from the fact that immigration remains within the competencies of the national state. The municipality manages hygiene, security and other facets of street life and public space but does not manage migration reception, process asylum claims or provide housing. Nevertheless, municipal governments have been called on to respond to local manifestations of the European ‘migration crisis’ through urban policy and governance solutions and have also become interlocutors of the state’s immigration politics, policies and practices.

In the past several years, the increased numbers of unauthorized migrants arriving in Europe – and specifically in Paris – have saturated reception mechanisms, exceeding the capacities – or willingness – of nation-states to expand service provision in order to accommodate them (Bhagat, 2021). Migrants arrive and are immediately confronted with chaotic and labyrinthine administrative procedures and insufficient services, are denied protection and abandoned by the national state, are sorted for ineligibility based on the Dublin regulation (Picozza, 2017) and otherwise excluded through systems of bordering, retention and circulation that constitute new and ongoing forms of the European border regime (Makaremi and Kobelinsky, 2008; De Genova, 2017; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2018). In Paris, the presence and proliferation of encampments in urban space are constitutive of this broader ‘crisis’ but also of the *démantèlements* and evacuations that produce and perpetuate it. For the 17 months of its existence, the CPA materialized a municipal version of migration reception that, while deceptive and insufficient, attempted a new approach that was in many ways contradictory to the French state’s inability – or unwillingness – to manage the crisis with a sure hand. In the following sections, I consider how the CPA worked beyond its stated purpose as a *dispositif de premier accueil*. Far from being a straightforward intervention by an emergent municipal humanitarianism, I argue that it shaped the affective, material and discursive politics of the

Parisian migration crisis by mediating relationships between migrants, Parisians and other volunteer humanitarians, the municipality and the state. I begin by documenting the genesis of the CPA through data gathered from documentary research and interviews with municipal actors.

Experimental, ephemeral and inclusive: the genesis of the CPA

So there we had a real brainstorming period ... because there was no other model in France and it was a ‘pilot’ project. At the same time, we still wanted to convey the exceptionalism of the crisis in Paris and lend prominence to our municipal interventions. (Project engineer from the Ville de Paris, interviewed March 2017)

The CPA opened on 10 November 2016 and operated until 31 March 2018 in Porte de la Chapelle, a neighbourhood in transition where multiple urban-renewal projects including construction for the 2024 Olympics were underway. The *dispositif* was spearheaded, designed and executed by the municipality of Paris, and 80 per cent of its funding was also municipal, while the national state provided the remaining 20 per cent of financing and entirely financed the shelter operations in the Halle (the Hall), where single men could stay in canvas-walled barracks for up to ten days. The CPA was France’s first and, at that point, Europe’s largest urban migration reception facility, and it was also unique and remarkable by design, as if to amplify the municipal government’s efforts to intervene in the unfolding ‘crisis’ of migration in Paris. From its earliest planning stages, the facility was intended to be ‘temporary, modular, flexible and ... inclusive’, according to a city project manager interviewed for this research – a specifically *municipal* intervention into a crisis that manifested locally even as it affected all of Europe. As a municipal intervention created as a ‘new *dispositif*’ to counter the crisis, it also served to highlight the French state’s incapacity – or unwillingness – to provide solutions to this crisis among many.

The CPA was architecturally remarkable by design. Located in a vacant former railyard in the highly trafficked northern intersection of Porte de la Chapelle, it was located less than 30 minutes’ walk from Sacré-Coeur Basilica, one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions. With its brightly coloured fences, whimsical murals and especially its eye-catching Bulle, the site was less reminiscent of the ordered simplicity of a UNHCR transit camp than the ephemeral outdoor music festivals that the architect, Julien Beller, claimed as inspiration (Darrieus, 2017). Indeed, the CPA’s playful design features and modular, upbeat appearance initially enhanced its working relationship with Utopia 56, an NGO founded by a producer in Brittany who previously specialized in running music festivals. Utopia recruited volunteers to work in the CPA (including this author) as a

form of friendly voluntourism that starkly differentiated the CPA from the violent border regimes of ‘fortress Europe’ and, eventually, also set it apart from the new French president Emmanuel Macron’s increasingly draconian discourse on immigration restrictions. Instead, the Bulle’s form of municipal humanitarianism seemed to propose a flexible, innovative version of the city of lights that was ‘made for sharing’² – and could generate symbiotic encounters between migrants arriving in the city and young local volunteers and voluntourists. The uncanny design of the Bulle, according to a municipal project manager interviewed for this research, was meant to convey its ‘experimental, ephemeral’ exceptionality and was said to be inspired by the tactical urbanism popularized by former Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë; it furthered Hidalgo’s ‘*esprit start-up*’ or can-do ethos (interview, June 2018). The design and conception of the CPA – and most visibly, the Bulle – exemplified this innovative, experimental and identifiably Parisian approach to municipal humanitarianism, following the Hidalgo brand of proposing innovative solutions to entrenched problems. It also staged the crisis of encampments as singular *events* of crisis rather than as the systemically entrenched result of necropolitical border regimes.

Behind the Bulle was the Halle: a disused railway hangar from which all the windows had been removed, its crumbling concrete exterior adorned with colourful and festive murals. The hollow, cavernous space, retrofitted with canvas-walled ‘cabins’ with electrical outlets, cots and rudimentary bedding, housed 400 *hommes majeurs isolés* (single adult males)³ for up to ten days each. The Halle also had laundromat facilities and a ‘free store’, both largely operated by volunteers. Emmaüs Solidarité was the NGO commissioned by the municipality to run the centre’s everyday operations, and they were supported by Utopia 56, who also ran missions outside the CPA in the encampments. Medical consultations were provided by Médecins du Monde and by the Samu Social, the state’s organization for social assistance. With these facilities, the CPA effectively conveyed a Parisian ‘duty of humanism’ as cited by the mayor, while also producing and refracting the politics of crisis. Although the CPA’s primary stated goal was to intervene in the crisis in Paris by creating an *accueil inconditionnel* in response to encampments, it also performed a brand of municipal humanitarianism that differentiated the Ville de Paris from the nation-state and positioned the city as a humanitarian actor while naming and framing the Parisian ‘migration crisis’ as one of shelter rather than the insufficiencies of the state. Initially proposed as a temporary and provisional solution to the persistent crisis of encampments in the north of the French capital, the CPA actually focalized the conditions of ‘crisis’ around the Bulle and in Porte de la Chapelle. When the facility opened on 10 November 2016, its stated purpose was to offer welcome and orientation as well as emergency shelter, but these functions were contingent on the national state meeting its responsibilities to protect and

provide for prospective asylum seekers as required under French, European and international refugee law.

The CPA as *dispositif*

A 'modular and replicable' crisis response

From the beginning, the idea was to create a pilot project that was modular and replicable, a kind of experimentation or laboratory. One point that was very strongly supported by the Ville de Paris was that the project be as close as possible to the values of the city in terms of the motto of *ville refuge*, *ville inclusive* [sanctuary city, inclusive city] – envisioning an *accueil inconditionnel* for everyone. But afterwards, we had to live with the reality. If the national state won't meet its responsibilities by [providing more housing for asylum seekers], we can't let new people in. (Project manager from the Ville de Paris, interviewed June 2018)

According to the descriptions of the city project manager, the CPA was initially conceived to 'be as close as possible to the values of the city' in terms of reception, inclusivity, sanctuary and unconditional reception. The second part of this quote refers to the impossibility of accomplishing this objective since it was contingent on the national state increasing its capacities to accommodate new arrivals. In reality, the CPA offered temporary shelter only to a certain category of migrant – the *homme majeur isolé*. This practice of categorizing migrants based on their genders, ages and countries of origin follows the French civil code that designates certain people (women, children and families) as 'vulnerable' and leaves others – namely *hommes majeurs isolés* – as the responsibility of the national state. Therefore, the CPA housed single men only – and media coverage narrated the Parisian migration 'crisis' as increasingly unmanageable and hazardous due to the disproportionate presence of (young, male, racialized) migrants whose numbers necessarily exceeded the capacities of the reception mechanisms. This process of bureaucratic categorization therefore produced a particular optics based on the fact that women, children and other 'vulnerable' categories of people were more readily offered shelter while many more single men and especially unaccompanied minors were left living in encampments. This gave the impression that 'migrants' were overwhelmingly young, single men who were less likely to elicit sympathy and be considered 'humanitarian' causes in the media.

Although the CPA had been created to respond to the 'crisis' of encampments, its overflow ironically served to populate newer encampments located directly in front of and adjacent to the facility created to manage it. By late 2016, the district became the visible epicentre of a 'chaos migratoire'

(migratory chaos) (Beaulieu, 2017) that was synonymous with the camp queue that had formed directly in front of the Bulle. Journalists called Porte de la Chapelle ‘les portes de l’enfer’ (the gates of hell), and their photos framed the *périph* with tents scattered underneath as an elsewhere reminiscent of Lesbos or Lampedusa, except one with the familiar domes of the Sacré-Coeur basilica in the near distance. Meanwhile, the everyday survival needs of migrants were largely met by individuals, civil volunteers who did outreach, food distribution and even provided emergency shelter to migrants in encampments. Some were working with Utopia 56 or other NGOs – Médecins Sans Frontières, the Red Cross or the Salvation Army, for example, while others had formed ad hoc collectives named after their neighbourhoods: P’tits déjs à Flandres (Breakfasts on the Boulevard de Flandre), La Chapelle en lutte! (La Chapelle’s Struggle) or Collectif Solidarité Migrants Wilson (Avenue Wilson Migrants’ Solidarity Collective). Utopia 56 still conscripted volunteers to work within the CPA but also did outreach in the encampments. They brokered volunteer labour and organized a growing network of *hébergeurs citoyens* (local citizens) willing to host migrants in their homes and businesses and even their vehicles parked in the street. Utopia volunteers (myself included) met people as they crowded the sidewalks every night at 8 pm outside the locked gates of the CPA, where they waited with their belongings after being asked to leave at the end of the day, and tried to find shelter for unaccompanied minors, women, families and others who were ineligible for overnight accommodation in the CPA.

‘Support[ing] the inhabitants of our city’: the CPA as municipal solidarity mechanism

The central question in all our [municipal planning] meetings was really our desire and political will for the CPA to respond to the basic needs of Parisians as well as for migrants by ensuring a dignified reception for all. At this point, it was mostly civil society responding to this crisis, and we needed to take responsibility and care about the fact that Parisians are the ones doing the work that the state should be doing. And we, as a city, must support the inhabitants of our city. (Ville de Paris project manager, interviewed June 2018)

The summer of 2017 was particularly punishing for migrants in Porte de la Chapelle. As the rolling *canicules d’été* (summer heatwaves) drove temperatures to the high 30s in the heat islands of the inner city, police continued to harass people as they slept in line while waiting for admission to the Bulle and teargassed volunteers distributing croissants. City workers dismantled shelters made of tarps, raincoats, plastic sheets and hoodies strung up along the fences, confiscated belongings in a form of *démantèlement* particular to

this camp queue and erected fences that were drilled into the ground so they couldn't be adjusted to accommodate sleeping. The medians and green spaces where migrants previously camped were fenced in, and a public works project of *désamiantage* (asbestos removal) was begun with city workers drilling into the cement directly in front of the centre where the camp queue was located (Le Gisti, 2017; Guilbaud et al, 2022).

Those who lived in the encampments were left without access to durable shelter, running water and regular food, amid rat infestations, scabies outbreaks and other epidemiological threats, with the constant threat of police violence as their only engagement with the state. Although the CPA's primary function had been to offer *accueil inconditionnel* to unhoused migrants, it soon became representative of the failures of the state as well as the supposedly unmanageable nature of the crisis. While the aesthetics and the functioning of the *dispositif* had been designed to meet the city's 'duty of humanism', it had also been designed to call attention to the project and to invite the goodwill and participation of Parisian volunteers. By opening the CPA, the municipality was responding to the concerns and efforts of citizen 'solidarians' already mobilized to support migrants in their neighbourhoods, as well as local residents who complained publicly about the encampments. The CPA also worked to recruit its own volunteer force and draw out public support for the project. To this end, in the autumn of 2016, a letter addressed to the *concitoyens* (fellow citizens) of the 18th arrondissement and signed by Hidalgo and Éric Lejoindre, the mayor of the 18th arrondissement, appeared in local mailboxes. It explained the encampments as a 'situation [that] is acceptable neither for migrants nor for the inhabitants', described the urgent, temporary, ephemeral, experimental character of the CPA and extended this invitation:

Anyone who wishes will be able to get involved to ensure the success of this project. There will be no shortage of volunteers – supervised by Emmaus – and everyone can already sign up to participate via the <https://jemengage.paris.fr/> platform. We would also like to take this opportunity to once again pay tribute to the civic-mindedness and solidarity shown by local residents over the last few months. (Letter from Anne Hidalgo and Éric Lejoindre, 7 September 2016)

This letter confirmed the double purpose of the CPA: to intervene in the crisis and to mediate Parisians' goodwill and solidarity efforts. It also attempted to subsume, appropriate and amplify the goodwill of volunteers and give them a place to focus their energies. Under the aegis of the Bulle, the Ville de Paris could demonstrate its 'humanism' and at the same time disavow responsibility for the ongoing crisis. However, in October 2017, Utopia 56 – the main broker of volunteer labour in the CPA – withdrew

its support for the centre and ceased its participation, taking a large part of the CPA's workforce along with it. Utopia's departure also amplified the critiques by NGOs who had denounced the repressive practices that were instrumentalized through the CPA's operations. Utopia continued (and still continues) to support migrants in the encampments and to organize their platform for citizens' host networks and has become a major voice advocating for unauthorized migrants' rights and the amelioration of reception conditions in France.

'Shitty welcomes': volunteers and paradoxical humanitarianism in the CPA

In late 2017, an anonymous citizens' collective calling themselves Collectif accueil de merde ('shitty welcomes collective') began to speak out against the burgeoning crisis around the CPA. One of their first actions was to smear the façade of the Assemblée Nationale in Paris with the message 'accueil de merde' written in what appeared to be faeces (but was in fact Nutella). This faecal terminology was taken up by citizen activists engaged in helping migrants in Porte de la Chapelle, refracting the state's and the municipality's own discourses about their obligations of *accueil* towards asylum seekers. During this period, Utopia 56 had become increasingly outspoken in their critique of the CPA's practices, claiming that since the OFII had moved their operations inside the CPA, the facility by definition no longer offered *accueil inconditionnel* but had instead become a sorting mechanism that excluded migrants' from the *dispositif*. In order to materialize and publicize their critique of the CPA, they vociferously disseminated their invitation to volunteers:

There is only one way to understand how the politics of this *accueil de merde* really plays out here in France ... and that is to come and work on the ground with us in Porte de la Chapelle! There's a public discourse about 'welcome' in France but, make no mistake, as they are making speeches they're also revamping policies of exclusion that play out right in front of our eyes, on the streets of Paris. This is France, this is Europe, in the year 2017. I encourage you to join us for an hour, three hours, a day so you can see for yourself. (Yann Manzi, founding director of Utopia 56, in a recruitment speech at the Protestant Students' Centre, September 2017)

Many volunteers who came to work in the CPA did indeed experience their participation in its institutional mechanisms as paradoxical humanitarian engagements that made them question state policies and practices. This ambivalence caused many volunteers to opt instead to join ad hoc citizens'

collectives or established NGOs providing ground support to migrants in the encampments by distributing water, food and blankets as well as shelter, orientation and advocacy. Working in encampments, volunteers also witnessed repeated *démantèlements* and risked being arrested or subjected to police violence themselves.

If the CPA represented an unprecedented innovation in ‘municipal humanitarianism’ as advanced by Hidalgo’s cabinet, the Ville de Paris has, since 2018, rolled out a continuum of other such initiatives. Since the CPA’s closure, several projects have been developed to respond to Parisians’ reflexes to support and show solidarity towards migrants while aligning with a municipal framework for volunteerism. Originating in the Paris City Council’s Social Action Centre, the Bulle, while significant, was only one of several humanitarian engagements developed by the city. In 2018, for example, the city initiated the first annual *Nuit de la solidarité* (solidarity night), which involved a homeless count, among other projects. They also developed the *Bulle solidaire* (solidarity bubble), which was initially a project to reuse the structure of the Bulle, which proved – after significant investment – not to be ‘modular’ after all because it could never be reinstalled in another location owing to structural and logistical concerns. Then came the *Fabrique de la solidarité* (solidarity factory). The *Halte humanitaire* (humanitarian drop-in) opened in May 2019; managed by the Salvation Army, it was first located at Porte de la Chapelle and then moved to the former city hall of the 1st arrondissement in order to fulfil the mayor’s cabinet’s stated objective of *repartition territoriale* (territorial redistribution) of the city’s humanitarian projects involving emergency shelter and other services for unhoused people.

Conclusion

In discussions with the authorities OFII and OFPRA [the French office of protection for asylum seekers], we knew we needed an exit towards the Halle for single men. And that we needed spaces for families and children to play ... At the beginning, the city of Paris was very determined to say, we do not want to amalgamate with the [immigration reception systems] of the national state. We only wanted the Bulle to be a space for unconditional reception. But at some point, looking at the models developed in Sweden and Germany, we thought we should develop an integrated route. In Germany when a person is greeted in a centre, she has all the steps right away, she does not have to search and run everywhere. We ended up realizing we wanted a ‘one stop shop’. (Alice, Ville de Paris employee, interview May 2018)

While the CPA’s primary stated objective was to welcome migrants and provide emergency shelter, I have argued that the form and functioning of

the *dispositif* worked to shape and produce the very conditions of ‘crisis’ it had been created to manage and govern. By shaping a crisis intervention based on emergency shelter, the *dispositif* defined the material, affective and discursive politics of ‘crisis’ as caused by encampments rather than the failures of the state. Through this lens, the situation was perceived as an unruly and surprising ‘humanitarian emergency’ that could be resolved by the municipality’s form of crisis urbanism: an ephemeral, experimental, innovative structure that obscured the necropolitics of the state beneath a festive, friendly countenance.

In theory, the CPA was supposed to offer an inclusive, coherent version of *accueil inconditionnel* that furthered the municipality’s utopian vision of a city that is ‘made for sharing’ (the slogan for the 2024 Olympics, in English), in which the municipality facilitated and focused the efforts of concerned local citizens (Ville de Paris, 2016) and young international ‘voluntourists’⁴ (Bouagga and Pette, 2017) alike, who helped to position the municipality as an interlocutor in the European migrant crisis and exacerbated this oppositional relationship with the national state (Benabent, 2017). Alongside its political uses as a way to demonstrate the French state’s inadequate handling of the migration crisis in Paris, the CPA also positioned Hidalgo as a problem solver proposing solutions to the national government (Morgat, 2017) while attempting to commandeer the efforts of civil actors – both Parisians and voluntourists – who were already self-organizing their support for migrants in their local neighbourhoods. Therefore, the opening of the *dispositif* positioned Paris and its mayor as important humanitarian actors and supported the city’s own ideal of itself as a *ville-refuge* (sanctuary city) while also legitimizing and justifying *démantèlements* and the control and invisibilization of migrants themselves.

If ‘the task that emerges from discussions of urban forced migration is to examine the city as a *situated and contested* interlocutor for State discourses and practices’ (Darling, 2017: 16, italics added), the CPA provided an opportunity for the municipality to not only manage the challenges of the ‘Parisian migration crisis’ through the multiple functions and strategic innovations of the *dispositif* but also to affirm and elevate the symbolic capital of Paris as a sanctuary city. It also ratified certain claims of the municipality about what the city could become – a flexible, expansive entity capable of responding to unforeseen situations through innovative forms of crisis urbanism like the CPA: in other words, the city could be everything the national state was not. In Paris, the intensified and highly visible crisis of migration threatened to undermine the ‘humanistic’ ethos of its socialist government and Hidalgo’s reputation for crafting innovative solutions to perennial urban issues (such as pollution, traffic and municipal budgeting). Still, it also undermined the city’s economic reliance on tourist dollars and the travel industry. At issue is not only the ability of Paris’s municipal

powers to manage migration reception at the local level but also to ensure that the current crisis does not affect the city's symbolic capital as the 'city of lights' – a nickname that refers not to the Eiffel tower's light show on summer nights but rather to the city's enlightenment values and its lucrative charisma as a living museum. As a Homeaway.com ad ubiquitous in the Paris metro in the spring of 2017 put it, 'parce que Paris est toujours Paris' (because Paris is always Paris). A crossroads since antiquity, the recent and current crisis of encampments highlights the fact that Paris is and always has been a mutable intersection of differential human mobilities (Sheller, 2016) that are manifest in urban spaces and constitutive of the crises that transform them.

Notes

- ¹ The designation of a migration 'crisis' in Europe, in France and in Paris is a topic worthy of sustained discussion but is outside the scope of this chapter. For a journalistic account of the migration 'crisis' in Paris, see Gagnon, 2016. For a sustained critical study of the naming and framing of the European migration 'crisis', see New Keywords Collective, 2016.
- ² Motto adopted by the city of Paris, in English, for the 2024 Olympics.
- ³ Bureaucratic category for single men of majority age unaccompanied by family members.
- ⁴ Volunteers either worked with Emmaüs Solidarité, the NGO contracted to operate the CPA, or with Utopia 56, a citizen-led Breton NGO that worked with migrants in the CPA and in the informal encampments surrounding it. Utopia 56 withdrew from working with the CPA in October 2017.

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PART II

Camps and the Provision of Care

The Governance of Migrant Reception and More-Than-Local Stories in Southern Costa Rica

Elena Reichl and Nanneke Winters

Introduction

In this chapter, we explore how our understanding of the governance of migrant reception centres can be enriched if we consider these centres not as external or exceptional but rather as part of the locality in which they are situated. Although reception centres may be designed based on ideas of exclusion and containment, they exist, function and develop in direct interconnection with their surroundings. Building on fieldwork in a state-run reception centre in Golfito and its adjacent border town in southern Costa Rica, the chapter explores how the centre's staff and other Golfito inhabitants, in interaction with an African, Asian and Caribbean population 'in transit', co-produce daily governance structures and experiences.¹ To do so, we follow Noemi Casati's (2018) argument that the moral considerations that inform interactions between migrants and residents not only revolve around locally meaningful social labels – such as legal status, ethnicity and nationality – but also incorporate the historical, political and economic configurations in which a centre is situated. At the same time, we argue that these local labels and configurations integrate cross-border, regional and global dynamics.

Our chapter thus fits with but also further expands the 'local turn' in migrant reception literature. In the past decade, scholars have increasingly paid attention to the growing importance and contextual specificity of multi-level governance in migrant reception and the multiplicity of local non-state actors involved (Hinger et al, 2016; Caponio, 2018; Missbach et al, 2018; van Breugel, 2020). While we build on this scholarship, we aim to show in

this chapter that the local embeddedness of migrant reception goes beyond current scholarly concern with the decentralization of migration policy and practice and the involvement of different societal actors in hosting, or refusing to host, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. We aim for a more comprehensive understanding of this embeddedness by drawing on recent literature that characterizes formal and informal camps, shelters and centres as serving multiple purposes and continuously evolving and, moreover, conceives of their boundaries as porous (Turner, 2015). By focusing on a mostly rural setting in the so-called Global South, the chapter also addresses the predominantly urban and European bias of the ‘local turn’ (Zapata-Barreiro et al, 2017).

To avoid essentializing and artificially confining the local (Schmiz and Räuchle, 2019: 3; Pasquetti and Sanyal, 2020: 2; Drotbohm and Winters, 2025), we consider local embeddedness as in fact *more-than-local*. More specifically, to understand how local inhabitants and populations in transit co-produce daily governance structures and experiences in Golfito’s migrant reception centre, we examine this centre’s embeddedness through place stories that can be traced locally yet integrate cross-border, regional and global dynamics. These ‘more-than-local’ stories, as we call them, develop within communities yet also engage those who are confronted with them or try to understand them – including researchers. Here we are inspired by Alison Hope Alkon (2004), who, in her work on community narratives of place in a relatively poor agricultural area in California, argues that:

[i]ndividuals and groups tell stories to perform for each other and themselves their histories and identities. One subject about which people tell stories is their community’s strengths and weaknesses and what it is like to live there ... The availability and emplotment of a particular narrative have observable consequences for the community that tells and is told it.

A logic of selecting, ordering and connecting distinguishes stories of place from ‘ordinary’ human communication (Alkon, 2004: 149). To be sure, although certain place stories become dominant, there is never just one story available (Alkon, 2004: 150). Narratives are multiple, emergent and contradictory, as the histories and identities of place are heterogeneous, relational, negotiated and unfinished (Darling, 2009). Moreover, following Doreen Massey’s work on a global sense of place (1994), it can be argued that a place is constructed precisely through its connections to and influences from elsewhere (Darling, 2009: 1940). Stories told about a place can highlight such connections and influences in multiple spheres, including, for example, trade routes and agreements, foreign investments, multilateral cooperation, but also diasporic engagements and global media.

Through the reformulation and reinforcement of a dominant place story, tangible consequences are evoked. Taking the migrant reception centre and its governance as a tangible consequence – as place stories materialized – we ask: what are the place stories that we can weave together from the ideas of inhabitants of Golfito about themselves, their daily lives and the place they live in? What are the more-than-local stories that inform their interactions with people on the move and that ultimately shape the governance structures and experiences in the centre?

To explore these questions, the chapter builds on fieldwork that was part of a collaborative, multi-sited research project aimed at gaining insight into the emerging trajectories of migrants who traverse Central American countries in an attempt to reach North America.² Ethnographically, the project focused on migrant journeys as well as on what we refer to as migration nodes, the local and institutionalized encounters of smuggling, surveillance and solidarity throughout key Central American sites. It thus followed an emerging migration infrastructure along what Wendy Vogt, for the Mexican context, has called an ‘arterial border’ (Vogt, 2017). This chapter discusses empirical insights from the research project – more specifically, from intermittent fieldwork at migrant reception shelters and border zones in Panama, Honduras and Costa Rica in 2019 and 2020. In these three countries, we explored the volatilities of recent migration policies and practices, as well as how migrants negotiate these both inside and outside shelters, taking into account reception dynamics among local border populations (Winters and Reichl, 2020; Drotbohm and Winters, 2021).

As part of the project, Elena Reichl, one of this chapter’s authors, conducted fieldwork at a migrant reception centre in the canton of Golfito, southern Costa Rica, and in the adjacent border town of Paso Canoas, shared with Panama. In 2016, the centre was established as a shelter for up to 200 migrants in transit, a place for humanitarian and medical care by the Red Cross and a state checkpoint where the Costa Rican Youth Welfare Office and the police could interview the people temporarily staying there. Elena’s findings suggest that racialized constructs of migrants on the part of the resident population, as well as the latter’s political and socio-economic interests in them, shaped how the migrant reception centre functioned.³

In what follows, we will first offer a brief review of literature that discusses the porous and evolving nature of migrant reception infrastructure. We will further contextualize the centre in Golfito as part of a transnational landscape of migration control. Our ethnographic description of the centre will then set the stage for three interrelated more-than-local stories that we identified: a sense of falling into oblivion in this canton of Golfito, where virtually all infrastructure was built from scratch by the United Fruit Company (UFC) in the 1930s but abandoned again in the 1980s (Stephens, 2008); a welcoming of border-oriented informal business for petty traders, taxi drivers

and former migrants alike; and an appreciation of a certain cosmopolitan humanitarianism that migrants evoke. These stories are more-than-local because they refer to cross-border, regional and global dynamics that shape the histories and identities of the place, even as this place constitutes the local embeddedness of the centre. As we will show, more-than-local stories structure relationships with and within the centre, between staff, migrants and residents of the nearby towns.

Migrant reception infrastructure in the making

Increasingly, the formal and informal camps, shelters and reception centres that host people on the move have received scholarly attention highlighting how they are always in the making (for example [Jansen, 2015](#); [Katz, 2015](#); [Turner, 2015](#); [Fresia and von Känel, 2016](#); [Moulin and Magalhães, 2020](#)). Although generally recognizing that camps, in their different guises, are key devices in border management and migrant containment and ‘poignant manifestations of the global inequalities assigned by race and citizenship’ ([Davies et al, 2019](#): 220), this literature has also emphasized that people on the move are not merely on the receiving end of such management and containment. Their agency shapes camps too. This can be seen, for example, in the ways they carve out space to live their everyday lives, gain access to services or challenge the authority of security and humanitarian personnel ([Jansen, 2015](#); [Turner, 2015](#); [Fresia and von Känel, 2016](#); [Bochmann, 2019](#); [Martin et al, 2020](#); [Eichner, 2025](#)).

These camps are shaped not only by the people on the move who are temporarily hosted in them but also by the people living and working in their immediate environments. In her article about a Sicilian refugee centre and its surrounding town, [Casati \(2018\)](#) demonstrates that interactions between the refugee population and local inhabitants are informed by local discourses about ‘deservingness’ and ‘good aid’ that can only be understood when what happens *outside* the centre is taken into consideration. Casati singles out deeply felt and historically shaped experiences of autonomy and suffering that directly engage a dysfunctional state *and* shape interaction between refugees and local inhabitants. Casati concludes that the historical, political and economic configurations in which a centre is situated are important for understanding local perceptions, categorizations and practices regarding people on the move.

This already shows that, as Simon [Turner \(2015\)](#) argues, reception centres or camps are not islands, and we need to consider the porosity of their spatial and temporal boundaries. In the introduction to a special issue that puts forward the question of what a camp is, [Turner \(2015: 141\)](#) argues that ‘[w]hile ... forms of exception and exclusion are certainly formative of refugee camps, we must keep in mind that these camps are not simply islands

unto themselves. They are transgressed by both those who are destined to live in them and the surrounding communities.’ Although Turner’s remarks mainly relate to camps that have been established for a long time and include entrepreneurial dynamics and public services such as health and education that are of interest to the surrounding communities, acknowledging the porosity of a camp’s boundaries is also important for the more emergent, small-scale reception centres that are the focus of our research. After all, the links between any kind of migrant reception infrastructure and its local, regional and geopolitical setting may provide relevant structuring factors beyond the care and control governance dynamics that are usually considered in reception literature (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019).

Transnational entanglements in Costa Rica’s migrant reception infrastructure

Although this chapter does not engage with the multi-level governance of migrant reception per se, it is important here to show how the overarching ‘story’ of reception infrastructure in southern Costa Rica also needs to be understood as more-than-local in the sense that it is embedded in cross-border governance and politics (Pasquetti and Sanyal, 2020: 2). We highlight three sets of dynamics that stood out during fieldwork: first, Costa Rica’s migrant reception infrastructure is embedded in changing Central American policies and practices of surveillance and assistance; second, it is embedded in Costa Rica’s image as a country that promotes global human rights; and third, it is embedded in border externalization efforts by the US. These interrelated dynamics will gradually emerge as we describe recent developments in the following sections.

Central America is a region historically characterized by different migrations and displacements. We recognize the importance of historicizing current patterns and experiences and of countering the tendency of presentist and crisis-focused accounts of human mobility that fail to take structural underpinnings into account (Pasquetti and Sanyal, 2020: 2). However, given space limitations, we focus here on describing key contextual developments that informed fieldwork in 2019, starting with the increased Cuban presence in the region. In the early 2010s, Costa Rica’s strategy for addressing Cuban transit migration resembled a ‘deportation mechanism’ whereby Costa Rica and Nicaragua initially coincided in sending migrants farther north because Cuba would not accept returned nationals (Villafuerte-Solís and García-Aguilar, 2016: 21). This strategy, which involved transporting migrants in a state bus to San José, from where they were ‘deported’ to Nicaragua and then ‘expelled’ (Bravo, 2015), became complicated as a result of there being insufficient resources in 2015 when an increasing number of Cubans decided to migrate to the US via Central America. Following the public political

rapprochement between the US and Cuba in late 2014, these Cubans feared they would find it more difficult to enter the US in the future (Fandl, 2017). To show solidarity with the Cuban state, and amid territorial disputes with Costa Rica, the Nicaraguan government decided to close its southern border in November 2015 (Villafuerte-Solís and García-Aguilar, 2016: 25). Around the same time, a smuggling ring was intercepted in northern Costa Rica, leaving migrants of Caribbean, African and Asian descent stranded in the country's border regions (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019).

Various non-governmental organizations, church associations and the Costa Rican Red Cross provided provisional assistance to groups of stranded migrants before the Costa Rican government took over to reorganize migration infrastructure (Murillo, 2015; Madrigal, 2019). In the course of 2016, the Costa Rican government opened temporary migrant centres (Centros de Atención Temporal para Migrantes or CATEMs) that allowed the state to offer humanitarian support in an ordered manner (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019). The Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME) installed six official CATEMs in places near the southern and northern borders of the country to replace informal, makeshift camps (Madrigal, 2019: 86–9); two of them, one in the north and one in the south, still existed during our fieldwork in 2019. In addition, migrants were given an official status. From late 2015 and 2016 onwards, groups of migrants from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean were eligible for a 25-day transit permit called the Permiso de Ingreso y Tránsito (PIT) (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019). The official name of this temporary transit permit, 'Permission for entry and temporary stay for humanitarian care for foreigners from Africa and/or South Asia and the Caribbean' (Sistema Costarricense de Información Jurídica, 2016), highlights the humanitarian framework emphasized by the government. The CATEMs and the PIT offered migrants a sense of security. At the same time, Costa Rica's humanitarian image, discourse and practice has been challenged on multiple levels, including for the racialized security and public health concerns described in local media.⁴ The racializing statements we will encounter in the stories of Golfito inhabitants were thus preceded by a migration management engaged in the 'othering' of migrants.

Moreover, the CATEMs and the PIT also gave the Costa Rican government a certain degree of control over the various populations in transit. This was considered important not only for the country's own sovereignty and safety but also for Costa Rica's key positioning amid different migration routes, its role in US border externalization and its attempts at regional migration management (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019). To the south, Costa Rica has been formally coordinating cross-border transit migration with Panama since February 2019: this agreement (Varela and Quesada, 2019) between the Costa Rican and Panamanian presidents had the goal of establishing a so-called *flujo controlado*, a 'controlled flow' of eligible migrants

(Drotbohm and Winters, 2020). It stipulates that medical and humanitarian care, as well as policing, should be organized bilaterally, mainly to avoid an accumulation of people at the borders and the social and health concerns this might provoke.⁵ The *flujo controlado* codified both the monitoring and the onward travel of migrants as its main policy directive, building further on the way the CATEMs and PIT operated in Costa Rica, geared towards moving people through the country as quickly as possible.⁶ This policy and practice reflect how migrant mobility can be both a target of governance and a technology used to control migration (Tazzioli, 2020a). This technology also has the effect of defining people on the move as migrants and assigning them the place of travellers in the state structure (Tazzioli, 2020b). The extent to which the Costa Rican state, humanitarian personnel and the migrants themselves consider their stay to be transitory is the reason why we refer to these persons as ‘in transit’, despite the problematic connotations of this term.

(Dis)locating reception

My (Elena’s)⁷ first attempt to reach the migrant reception centre, or CATEM, by bus ended 20 kilometres from the centre in the port town of Golfito. When I saw the blue bay through the bus window, I knew I had missed the centre. Desperate and indignant at the same time, I complained to the bus driver that he hadn’t told me in time. I couldn’t believe it. I had copied Isaac,⁸ a Ghanaian I had met at the border, who told the bus driver he wanted to go to the *refugio* when we rode the bus together at night only a few days before. While Isaac had managed to be let out at the right place on the winding country road, I whizzed past the centre using the same strategy. Arriving in Golfito, I was unsuccessful in explaining my desperation to the bus driver. He did not understand what had gone wrong. Another passenger intervened, explaining how the bus driver must have thought I was going to a rescue centre for sea turtles. He repeated several times what I should have said to be let out at the CATEM: ‘Yo quiero ir dónde están los negros’ ‘I want to go where the Black people are.’ (Fieldnotes, 11 September 2019)

While I, White, female, mid–20s, in jeans might have given the bus driver the impression of a sea turtle tourist or volunteer, it was immediately obvious to the bus driver transporting Isaac that he, dark-skinned, male, also mid–20s and in jeans, wanted to ‘go where the Black people are’. The term *refugio*, which Isaac and I both used, can refer to a place of refuge for either humans or animals, which certainly contributed to the bus driver’s misunderstanding of my intent. Costa Rican state officials gathered migrants in the CATEM because they qualified for a temporary travel permit for humanitarian

reasons and had to go through different processes in the centre depending on their age, nationality, health condition and gender. However, during my stay in the vicinity of the CATEM, it became increasingly clear that other inhabitants of Golfito simplified ‘migrant multiplicities’ (Tazzioli, 2020b) along racialized lines. Both approaches share exoticizing and exceptionalizing notions to make sense of migrants travelling through Golfito, either to manage them, in the case of state authorities, or, in the case of other local populations, to include them, as outsiders, in Golfito’s environment. In search of a practical and unobtrusive solution for overseeing a relatively unfamiliar migrant presence locally, the government set up the CATEM in-between two towns on a rural road:

Once you find the CATEM, which is not marked on (online) maps, you stand in front of a sliding gate consisting of a wire mesh fence about 2 metres high. From here you can see a guard house and, 100 metres behind it, a hall in front of which a van of the migration police, an ambulance and the staff’s private cars are normally parked. A row of blue mobile toilet cabins forms the left edge of the lot. Arriving staff check in in the morning, the gate opens with a squeak, and they walk across the grey pebbles that cover the entire forecourt to the hall. There are two entrances, through a big gate opposite the toilets mostly migrants and Red Cross workers enter the big wide hall, while the cleaners and the policemen enter it through the office of PANI [Patronato Nacional de la Infancia], the state-run child protection organization] and the police. From the two offices, the spacious hall, furnished only with beds and a few tables, can be easily seen through the glazed doors and the inward-facing windows. In the past, when the hall housed a factory, workers were probably watched in this way; now the panoptical architecture seemed to serve to monitor migrants. (Fieldnotes 11 September 2019)

On the other side of the glass, these migrants tended to busy themselves waiting, strategizing and making a living. Some of them earned a bit of money in the centre, as hairdressers or by repairing mobile phones, water damaged during the arduous crossing of the Darién Gap between Colombia and Panama (Drotbohm and Winters, 2020). Besides earning extra money, however, they were mainly engaged in reproductive work in and around the centre, preparing meals together with Red Cross workers, caring for small children or washing clothes, which they hung out to dry in the outdoor area in front of the hall. Most of the migrants also regularly went to nearby Río Claro or Paso Canoas to receive money orders at Western Union or to shop.

During Elena’s research in 2019, every day except on weekends most of the police and Red Cross workers were present at 8 am. At night, in addition

to the accommodated migrants, only the staff of a security company were there. Three times a day, the Red Cross provided food and took care of injuries and illnesses in a separate office in the factory building. Mainly in the mornings, the police and the child protection organization PANI conducted interviews with migrants classified as coming from ‘countries in war and conflict’ and with families travelling together. At the same time, in the morning, other staff members received newly arriving migrants in the border town of Paso Canoas, 40 km away. Police officers exchanged information with their Panamanian colleagues via a short message service and organized a handover three times a week. By bus, Panamanian officers would transport up to 100 people from state-run shelters in the Panamanian interior to the border, where Costa Rican officers awaited their arrival. The border was not only located near the southern CATEM but its staff also organized the reception, registration and control of migrants at the border, which meant the two locations were closely linked (Winters and Reichl, 2020).

People classified as families or coming from selected ‘countries in war and conflict’ were brought directly to the shelter in the afternoon after going through a lengthy biometric admission procedure at the border; others could decide – depending on their admission and the availability of accommodation capacities at the CATEM – whether they would continue their travel right away or have a rest in the centre. Upon their arrival, Red Cross staff briefed them on the rules and procedures of the CATEM and provided them with personal hygiene products such as toothbrushes, diapers and sanitary pads. If interviews were scheduled for them, the new arrivals completed them mostly the next day. While most migrants only stayed in the centre for a few days or until they had completed the interview, others sometimes stayed for several weeks or months – which always involved challenging negotiations with the staff, as we will see subsequently – and occasionally also applied for asylum in Costa Rica. Most migrants, however, would travel independently to the north of Costa Rica after a short stay in the centre. There, they could either stay a bit longer in the northern CATEM or try to cross the border with Nicaragua directly.

While the interviews with the families had the aim of identifying child welfare risks, the interviews with people classified as coming from ‘countries in war and conflict’ were about their migration routes and experiences and their motives for fleeing. However, it was not primarily violence and armed conflict in the country of origin that led to this categorization. For example, people who arrived fleeing the Anglophone conflict in Christian-majority Cameroon (Beseng et al, 2023) were not counted in this category (Reichl, 2021: 55). Instead, the countries selected as being in war and conflict were congruent with those that the Trump administration included in its executive order 13769 of 27 January 2017, which became known and problematized as the ‘Muslim (travel) ban’ (Fassin, 2019). Although, at the time of research,

Costa Rica had not entered into official border externalization agreements with the US (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019), the police officers identified fear of terrorists on the part of the US as one reason for conducting these interviews, a fear they themselves did not necessarily share (Reichl, 2021: 54). Some police officers tried to reconcile the tension between Costa Rica's image as a 'humanitarian transit country' (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019), an image they generally identified with and that was part of their place story, and the United States' xenophobic anti-Muslim policies by trying to conduct the interviews in a particularly sensitive manner (Reichl, 2021: 59–62). In the cases Elena observed during her stay, migrants who completed the interviews with the child welfare organization or the police were given the right to continue their journey immediately afterwards.

In the centre and at the border, we can thus see unfold an interplay of exceptionalization, isolation and top-down management and monitoring of certain people on the move (presumably influenced by migration policy and practices elsewhere), as well as possibilities of everyday interaction that go beyond sheer control. The migrants were isolated from the local population or other travellers as they were transported in a state bus from the border in Paso Canoas to the remote Golfito shelter, a procedure that exemplifies the controlled transit ideology of the *flujo controlado* agreement. Yet, as Lea Gelardi (2021: 97) shows for a transit centre in Germany with, in fact, more restrictive policies and practices than the CATEM, processes of demarcation between local inhabitants and migrants are never completely exclusionary but rather dynamic and unsettled. We will further elaborate the porosity and evolving character of the CATEM and the *flujo controlado* border dynamic through the more-than-local stories in the following sections.

A story of oblivion

Elena's conversations with Pedro, a 40-something swimming-pool constructor who lived near the town of Golfito, and his uncle Rodolfo are revealing when it comes to thinking about the socio-economic context of the Golfito area and its history (fieldnotes, 13 September 2019). Rodolfo invited Elena to Pedro and his mother's house for coffee after a ride home. Pedro's first question to Elena, after learning she worked at the CATEM, was whether the migrants caused her any problems.

In response, Elena asked him whether he experienced any problems. Pedro thought for a moment but said 'no'. Instead, he drew connections between US nationals, indigenous peoples and other Costa Ricans, turning the talk into a conversation about privilege and precariousness. Unlike Americans visiting Costa Rica, who are legally privileged, Pedro had migrated to the US but had to leave the country after only a short time because he did not get a long-term residence permit. In a way, he shared the desire for a better life

in the US that many people in the CATEM had but also the legal situation that complicated this desire. Rodolfo attributed his nephew's tendency to problematize the presence of migrants mainly to his frustration over the failed migration attempt, his economically precarious circumstances, his low level of schooling and a widespread feeling of being forgotten that many people in Golfito would share. Rodolfo narrated how Golfito went from being a stronghold of banana cultivation to a marginalized region.

In the 1930s, the region around Golfito was a sparsely inhabited forest area that was cleared by mainly Honduran and Nicaraguan workers recruited by the UFC for plantations, an airport and a railway network from Palmar to the newly built port in Golfito. While it was based in the area, the UFC took over almost all infrastructural measures and even built the local hospital, having as one of its main tasks the treatment of work-related accidents, above all the poisoning of banana plantation workers (Gibson, 1999). A number of factors, most notably a price crash in the world banana market and a labour strike, led to the abrupt closure of the UFC site in Golfito in the 1980s, leaving the former workers living under economically precarious conditions in settlements scattered throughout the region. Even today, overgrown remnants of the railway line and Golfito's continued structural disadvantage are reminders of the UFC and the abrupt closure of its site. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC), the Brunca region, of which Golfito is part, has the highest absolute poverty rate in Costa Rica at 32.2 per cent compared to the national average of 21.1 per cent (INEC, 2018: 43–7).

Social inequality is also high within Golfito more broadly in comparison to the rest of the country. On the one hand, mostly US-American second-home tourists own villas overlooking its blue bay, with people like Pedro building their swimming pools, while, on the other hand, artisanal fishermen try to survive despite the pollution of the waters caused by years without a functioning waste disposal system after the withdrawal of the UFC (Gibson, 1999). The sense of being forgotten that Rodolfo described may be rooted in the fact that, while the rest of Costa Rica was experiencing an economic upturn and preservation, the government tended to sacrifice the Golfito area ecologically (Gibson, 1999) as well as socio-economically (Warner, 2007). The government did, however, establish a tax-free zone in the nearby border town of Paso Canoas to stimulate the local and regional economy. With the creation of this tax-free zone, the informal sector in which many people in the region work expanded, with shoppers from elsewhere in Costa Rica and migrants being welcome customers for the drinks and snack stands, informal taxis and cheap goods from Panama. In the next section, we will further show how both disappearing and newly emerging local opportunities are marked by cross-border dimensions of 'the local' and together shape migrant governance and experience.

Business opportunities at Costa Rica's margins

Stories telling of a sense of being forgotten, like those of Pedro and Rodolfo, coexisted with an increased visibility of international travellers, especially migrants in transit. While the Golfito area is socio-economically marginalized within Costa Rica, it is also a border region with specific opportunities for goods and services directed at travellers. This was illustrated by the overwhelming number of taxi drivers and informal snack traders at the border. One of them led me to a hotel with African food run by 'Mama Africa'. I had heard of Mama Africa's hotel and had been looking for it to get to know an important reference point for African migrants besides the CATEM:

With the help of a coconut seller working at the official border crossing in Paso Canoas I found the hotel. We took a long walk through the deserted alleys of the border town to get there. 'Mama Africa', as she introduced herself, was serving her guests (from Angola, Eritrea, Ghana, the (DRC) [Democratic Republic of the Congo] and Haiti, they told me) *foufou*, a West and Central African dish she made from maize porridge. She also invited me to eat while she told me her story. She had come to Paso Canoas from the DRC three years ago. After some tribulations, she met Leyla, a Costa Rican, who owned the hotel, and they started a collaboration in which Mama Africa receives and cooks for the guests. Her principle is that migrants pay when they can. In addition, she earns some money by selling SIM cards at the border and letting migrants use her ID to withdraw money from Western Union. Mama Africa told me that she was friends with many of the CATEM staff and they would help each other. (Fieldnotes, 6 September 2019)

In her hotel, Mama Africa's work was complementary to that of CATEM as a shelter for migrants, her clientele being mainly Africans. Like the CATEM staff, she always seemed to know when and how many migrants were arriving and was well connected with some of the migration authorities. A former CATEM staff member illustrated her network by saying that Mama Africa had what he called 'tentacles' that would reach beyond the Costa Rican border in Paso Canoas. Some of Mama Africa's guests did not sleep at her hotel but in the centre and just came to eat with her. Like Western Union, it was a fixed address to which migrants staying in the centre travelled. Indirectly, informal food sales provided a way for the CATEM staff to diversify the limited menu.

Apart from their trips to Paso Canoas, migrants could also buy snacks and drinks locally at the centre from a private vendor. If someone at the centre complained that there was only water and tea to drink, the person was referred to the trader at the fence who offered sweet lemonades. This way, the CATEM operated in line with the economic needs and strategies

of Golfito residents. Capitalizing on informality and inventiveness, it built on a ‘strength’ of this community in Alkon’s (2004) sense. Another example is that its staff tolerated, but were careful not to formally recommend, the informal taxi drivers, so-called *taxistas piratas* who gathered in front of the gate. They did recommend, on the other hand, a private long-distance bus company, whose departure times were listed in the CATEM police office.

These practices reflect the cross-border character of economic dynamics in the area and showcase how inhabitants, migrants who stay and migrants who leave have reshaped the local socio-economic fabric. The relatively open style of camp governance can be seen as a tangible consequence of the dialectic between oblivion and business opportunities created at the margins.

A story of humanitarian cosmopolitanism: work in the CATEM is ‘muy bonito’

At the same time, the CATEM itself provided welcome job opportunities for craftsmen, cleaners, security personnel and employees from the Red Cross, the Youth Welfare Office and the police. In the Golfito context, working at the CATEM may offer a nice change of pace. Beyond a humanitarian concern or an opportunity for profit, the phrase that Red Cross and police staff in the centre used most often to describe their work with migrants in transit was ‘muy bonito’ – very nice. Through their interaction with people from all over the world, they could experience and learn about life elsewhere and enjoy a feeling of supporting those in need.

Several police officers mentioned they liked assisting people in threatening situations. For example, Rodry showed Elena a photo on his mobile phone of a boy from Angola. His parents were in the centre and said they had lost their son in the jungle between Colombia and Panama; that the river had carried him away. However, they had not yet given up hope that he might still be alive. Rodry sent a text message to Panamanian police officers with the boy’s photo and details. He said that every now and then a person thought to be lost is found – which makes his work ‘muy bonito’ – very nice.

But ‘muy bonito’ also goes beyond helping, beyond care. It may include getting to know other cultures and ways of life, including a new language. Rebecca from the Red Cross, who occasionally asked Elena about Brazilian music, enjoyed practising her language skills with migrants. Like some of her colleagues, she learned Portuguese from those coming from Lusophone countries or those who had spent time in Brazil. Rebecca not only enjoyed the learning experience but her improved Portuguese skills also enabled her to connect with migrants on a more personal level.

Rebecca’s account exemplified one of the ways friendly relationships beyond care and control developed between the centre staff and migrants. However, in the CATEM as in Costa Rican society more broadly, counter

currents to a general appreciation of Costa Rica as an open and ‘humanitarian transit country’ (Winters and Mora Izaguirre, 2019) could be identified. These ranged from problematizing male migrants as *machista*, coming from places where women are not ‘empowered’, to assumptions about their deservingness. In several cases, migrants stayed at the centre voluntarily for several weeks, during which time some of them established relationships and got involved in work routines, for example cooking the food. But it was common for police officers to urge them to move on, mostly on the grounds that local supplies would otherwise not be sufficient. These situations interrupted the friendly atmosphere and recalled the structurally unequal positions of staff and migrants and their securitized environment:

Adriana, a CATEM police officer, once said: ‘The migrants have money to spend their free time, but not to travel.’ Another policeman, addressing a migrant, added half-jokingly that there was no more food and that the man should return to his home country. The migrant replied to this suggestion by asking, ‘So they can kill me?’ (Fieldnotes, 20 September 2019)

Such counter currents make it clear that, in addition to the locally dominant views of humanitarian aid and feelings of cosmopolitanism, nationalist and exclusionary discourses also played a role, being linked to the expectation of transit and justified primarily in terms of limited resources.

Nonetheless, the CATEM provided a relatively open space of interaction in which narratives of cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism reinforced each other. Any negative representation of migrants or their treatment could be juxtaposed with the ostensibly harsh and militarized ways in which Panamanian authorities dealt with migrants, something often complained about by migrants and CATEM staff alike. This way, as Casati (2018: 805) argues, ‘[l]ocal circumstances shape reception in non-linear ways and individual dispositions to foreigners are co-constructed in relations that bring together local histories, values, emotions and even chance’. Moreover, as we have tried to show through Golfito’s place stories that are narrated amid transnational and changing entanglements in Costa Rica’s migrant reception infrastructure, these interactions incorporate histories, imaginaries, socio-economic circumstances and (geo)political dynamics that are decidedly more-than-local.

Conclusion

The more-than-local place stories of the Golfito area, of oblivion and marginalization, an appreciation of the business that people on the move bring along, a longing for a sense of cosmopolitanism and a humanitarian

image that needs to be maintained structure interactions with and within the centre. Offering a more comprehensive understanding of local embeddedness, such an open approach allows us to see an environment in which relationships between migrants and staff can go beyond care and control governance thanks to informality, curiosity and perhaps a dose of regional rivalry. While Costa Rica's political interest lies in moving these migrants forward as quickly as possible, we witness a kind of 'open island' approach, of having these migrants far away enough to avoid social discomfort and to manage public safety concerns, yet close enough to allow for exchange and profit.

Locating the CATEM through the place stories of the people working in and around it thus enables us to understand how the centre functions and is governed and experienced. Although accounts of migration-related business opportunities and, perhaps to a lesser extent, cosmopolitan ideas and practices of humanitarianism have been emphasized elsewhere, considering the CATEM and its governance as the tangible materialization of such place stories and their counter currents challenges the notions of isolation and exceptionality that surround migrant reception infrastructures. Moreover, place stories reveal that the 'local' governance of migrants is in fact more-than-local. This is an important contribution to scholarship dedicated to studying and problematizing the 'local turn' of migrant reception, as it allows us to historicize, contextualize and de-essentialize notions of reception and of migration itself.

In this sense, we recognize that the *flujo controlado* between Costa Rica and Panama is quite exceptional in a region that is considered an extension of North America's backyard. Through sharing biometric data and awaiting permission to move further, this portion of people's journey is monitored and, to a considerable extent, tolerated by the US, a process in which the CATEM plays a vital role. The centre offers a certain level of control and freedom simultaneously, both of which seem pertinent in this marginalized border region where migrants cross, get stuck and generate business. Yet, although the *flujo controlado* may be exceptional in its specific form, marginalized border regions and divergent migrant routes are not, making a better understanding of the shaping of reception across the world all the more urgent.

This brings us to our final point, the importance of not imposing a false binary on migrants and local inhabitants in terms of mobility experiences. Both groups may be involved with migration and reception dynamics, albeit to a different extent. Just as migrants in transit can get (temporarily) slowed down due to the bureaucratic processes of reception, their im/mobility may become part of the livelihoods of residents, who may become more (or less) mobile themselves in the process. This is especially important considering the volatility of migration as it engages multiple contexts

simultaneously. To illustrate, in southern Costa Rica and elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic provoked a closure of borders and reception centres, a shift in the employment situation of their personnel and new obstacles for people on the move – both long-distance migrants and those from local (border) communities.

Notes

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- ² ‘African trajectories across Central America: displacements, transitory emplacements, and ambivalent migration nodes’. This project (2018–22) was led by Heike Drotbohm, carried out at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and generously funded by the DFG, grant number: 406978565. For more information, please see the project’s website <https://trajectories-central-america.de/>
- ³ In the years that have passed between fieldwork and finalizing this publication, migrant centers in Costa Rica have gone through substantial changes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, shifts in government, and rapid developments in national and regional migration governance, centers have been closed, re-opened, moved, re-branded, and re-purposed (see Campos, 2025). Currently, the Estación Migratoria Sur in southern Costa Rica accommodates people who have been deported from the US. Although we do not have the space to elaborate on these changes, they further substantiate the importance of considering the local embeddedness and entangled contexts of migrant reception.
- ⁴ For example, government officials described the new arrivals primarily in racialized and legal categories as ‘black-skinned’ and ‘undocumented’ and felt that they caused concern among the surrounding population (Madrigal, 2019: 84).
- ⁵ With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Costa Rican government closed its borders and CATEMs (Navarro-Alvarado, 2021: 66), although migrants who were already hosted in Golfito were allowed to stay a few months longer. During 2020, the border was first reopened to travellers considered most economically relevant in the national framework, meaning international tourists and labour migrants in the coffee sector (Navarro-Alvarado, 2021: 75). Transit migrants eligible for the PIT were not allowed entry until November 2020. In December 2021, a Red Cross worker texted Elena that the CATEM in Golfito was still closed. However, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) noted in its displacement tracking matrix that migrants continued to travel through southern Costa Rica, using commercial accommodation in the region around Paso Canoas or sleeping in the streets (IOM, 2021).
- ⁶ It should be mentioned here that the biometric and other personal data of travellers collected by Panama and Costa Rica are shared with the US.
- ⁷ The ethnographic material will be presented from Elena’s perspective.
- ⁸ The names of research participants are all pseudonyms.

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Camps and Safe Houses: Serbia's Local Geographies of Reception and Care for Unaccompanied Refugee Children

Jessica Collins-Bojovic and Claudio Minca

Introduction

Since 2015, it is estimated that over 100,000 ‘unaccompanied and separated children’ (hereafter, unaccompanied children) have made the journey along the refugee Balkan Route via Serbia in an attempt to reach Western Europe (Milutinović, 2019).¹ These children, primarily from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, typically leave their home countries due to familial pressures, violence, persecution and/or economic insecurity (Jovanovic and Besedic, 2020). During the so-called ‘long summer of migration’ in 2015, an informal corridor formed from Greece through the countries of the former Yugoslavia and then into the European Union (EU) via Hungary or Croatia (Beznec et al, 2016; Stojić Mitrović et al, 2020). In 2016, this corridor was formally closed by the authorities of the region, which caused Serbia to become a ‘bottleneck’ for refugees, including unaccompanied children. Nevertheless, refugees continued their efforts to enter the EU via ‘the Game’, a term they use to describe informal border-crossing attempts using various tactics often supported by smugglers (see Minca and Collins, 2021). Notwithstanding their vulnerability, children also participate in the Game, and, while some eventually succeed, others often remain stranded in Serbia for long periods of time. In response to the increasing mobilities of unaccompanied children through the region, Serbia has expanded its capacity to accommodate and protect this demographic. According to the United Nations (UN) (2017: 4), ‘unaccompanied and separated children

should be placed in the national/local alternative care system', that is, either in family or community care. At the time of writing, in late 2021, unaccompanied children in Serbia were housed in refugee camps and 'safe houses' across the country; however, many also resided outside this system of protection and slept in makeshift spaces, smuggler accommodation or hostels. Safe houses are specialized centres for children without parental care managed by either a governmental institution or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They typically accommodated those under the age of 14 and those in the most vulnerable conditions, for example victims of gender-based violence or human trafficking. Considering the growing importance of the local care system, this chapter will discuss the institutional structures of accommodation available to unaccompanied children in Serbia between 2017 and 2022, the role of local organizations in accommodating and caring for these children and how safe houses were used (or not) in a context in which many of these children endlessly attempted to cross the border and continue their journey beyond Serbia.

During our research, we drew from a combination of primary and secondary sources. We consulted a vast array of documents produced by humanitarian organizations operating at diverse scales (see, among others, [Krašić et al, 2017](#); [Milutinović, 2019](#); [Jovanovic and Besedic, 2020](#)). We also conducted interviews with 13 representatives from nine local civil society organizations working with unaccompanied children.² We did not interview unaccompanied children due to the various ethical considerations associated with the involvement of this demographic in research ([Chase et al, 2020](#); [Save the Children, 2021](#)) and because the chapter is specifically focused on the role of 'the local' in shaping the reception and the care of unaccompanied children in Serbia.

The chapter starts with a selective review of the relevant literature in social work and child welfare: work on the local governance of asylum seekers and refugees and the work on the Balkan Route that has engaged with the accommodation and care of unaccompanied children (see, among others, [Kohli, 2014](#); [Fili and Xythali, 2017](#); [Derluyn, 2018](#); [Serviere, 2020](#)). As the question of the accommodation of unaccompanied children has been relatively overlooked in the fields of camp studies and camp geographies, we draw upon this literature to illustrate why this issue should be further incorporated into those fields. Overall, through this case study we intend to reflect on the distinct role of the local in the ways in which designated refugee camps for unaccompanied children and safe houses work within the wider camp system in Serbia and how they influence the onward journey of refugee children. We do so in the hope that these perspectives will be further incorporated and taken into consideration in future debates concerning formal and informal refugee camps along the Balkan Route.

The local governance of unaccompanied and separated refugee children

Within the camp studies and camp geographies literature, residents of both makeshift and institutional camps are often viewed as a collective mass – albeit one that is frequently divided into broad cultural, geographical or ethnic categories in the design and management of camps (see [Carter-White and Minca, 2025](#)). However, literature in refugee studies has argued for the need to attend to the diversity of camp residents and the multiplicity of experiences among those who have transited through and lived in camps (see, among others, [Ramadan, 2013](#); [Debrix, 2015](#); [Newbold and McKeary, 2017](#); [Oesch, 2017](#); [Martin et al, 2019](#); [Mishra et al, 2021](#); [Tazzioli, 2020](#)). By focusing on the experience of unaccompanied refugee children in Serbia's camp system, this chapter highlights the radically different experience of distinct demographics of refugee residents.

To do this, we engage with broader discussions within the social work and child welfare literature on the reception and care of unaccompanied refugee children, as well as the various (and often local) protection frameworks, in destination and transit countries (see, among others, [Kohli, 2014](#); [Fili and Xythali, 2017](#); [Derluyn, 2018](#); [Doering-White, 2018](#); [Lietaert et al, 2020](#); [Serviere, 2020](#); [De Backer et al, 2024](#)). Such frameworks encompass the needs and rights of the child, including rights to accommodation, institutional guardianship and best practices of care. In Europe, due to the growing number of unaccompanied children, several countries have developed specific reception centres at the national level, which are typically separated from the mainstream structures provided to local children and youth ([Derluyn, 2018](#)). However, it is at the local level that the accommodation and care of these children are managed. Therefore, the social work literature provides foundational knowledge of these demographics and their needs, which assists us in further evaluating and understanding the role of the local in governing the accommodation and care of this demographic. The growing literature on local refugee governance highlights the role of the local in shaping the reception and accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers globally (see [Glorius et al, 2019](#)), often engaging with local governance at the city level (see [Caponio et al, 2018](#)). [Ricard Zapata-Barrero and his co-authors \(2017\)](#) have even suggested that we are facing a 'local turn' in migration governance. Within this turn, 'local level governance is no longer considered merely a level of policy implementation but is considered an independent level of policy development' (van [Breugel, 2020](#): 1). For example, John [Doering-White \(2018\)](#) has explored non-governmental migrant shelters as an alternative to detention centres for unaccompanied children in transit through Mexico and the role of local actors in caring for those in transit.

These non-governmental structures have recently emerged in Mexico as safe spaces for children to pause and evaluate their options prior to determining their next steps: applying for asylum within the transit country or continuing their perilous journey (Doering-White, 2018: 40, 45). Ravi Kohli (2014) has similarly acknowledged the broader nature of children in transit countries – ‘taking time and making time to gather enough resources to move on, waiting for connections, getting intermittent assistance from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and charities, and gleaning intelligence about routes to destination countries’ (89). Within the Greek context, Divya Mishra and her co-authors (2021) have found the role of local civil society to be essential in cases of facilitating access to formal accommodation. Those children who could not access such accommodation would often stay with smugglers, if they could afford to, or they would sleep in makeshift spaces while relying on NGOs and/or refugee communities to meet their basic needs (Mishra et al, 2021). While we do not have the space to go into depth here, these three distinct examples identify the clear role the local may play in providing care and accommodation to unaccompanied children across the globe.

While the Balkan Route literature has acknowledged the growing presence of unaccompanied children within Serbia (Šantic et al, 2017; Cekerevac et al, 2018; Galijaš, 2019; Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica, 2019; Serviere, 2020; Topalovic et al, 2021), the specific structures of accommodation, the role of institutional and civil society organizations in supporting this demographic and their governance and related spatialities remain to be examined in detail. The exception to this is Carole Serviere’s (2020) analysis of unaccompanied children in Serbia, which focuses on the established social work system and highlights key takeaways from a series of interviews with local organizations. Serviere emphasizes the critical role that civil society plays in addressing unaccompanied children’s ‘complex and fragmented personal itineraries’, as well as the ‘ambivalent role of Serbia as a transit space, where [children] are stuck but also can find resources’ (2020: 26). We therefore seek to build upon this notable work by developing an analysis of the specified structures of support available to unaccompanied children that adopts a geographical perspective focused on the role of the local in governing these spaces and the onward mobility of unaccompanied children. This lens further emphasizes the complexity of Serbia’s system of camps and the fact that it does not operate in isolation, since various institutions intervene within the system and the accommodation of unaccompanied refugee children. We suggest that the growing literature on local refugee governance can contribute to how camp studies scholars understand camp systems, as this body of work highlights the role of the local in shaping the reception and accommodation of refugees (Zapata-Barrero et al, 2017; Caponio et al, 2018; Glorius et al, 2019).

The reception and care of unaccompanied refugee children in Serbia

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2018; 2019; 2020; 2022), between 2017 and 2021 nearly 11,000 unaccompanied children were identified in Serbia. In response to this number of children transiting through for extended periods of time, a specialized approach to providing this demographic with safe and adequate accommodation was developed by national and local actors (see Figure 8.1). The Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (hereafter, ‘the Commissariat’), a public institution responsible for the accommodation and care of refugees, oversaw the process of reopening and establishing 19 institutional refugee camps throughout the country (Minca et al, 2019). Registered unaccompanied children resided in either a refugee camp or a safe house. However, not all unaccompanied children within the country were registered, since there was an undetermined number living in refugee camps whose status as minors may have been undetected, intentionally withheld or simply ignored by the authorities. These children, despite living in a camp, were registered as adults and remained outside the system of protection necessary for their particular needs. Additionally, it was estimated that roughly half of the unaccompanied children in Serbia resided in makeshift camps, smuggler accommodation or hostels – ‘invisible’ to the system – in their efforts to quickly access the border regions and exit Serbia on the advice of smugglers and, sometimes, family (interview with Save the Children staff, 22 January 2021).

In 2017, the Commissariat first organized and attempted the provision of exclusive camp accommodation for unaccompanied children in the town of Obrenovac (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights [BCHR], 2018a; UNHCR, 2018). The Obrenovac camp was located roughly 30 km from Belgrade and opened when the occupants of the notorious makeshift camp known as the ‘Belgrade Barracks’ were evicted (Minca et al, 2018: 50). Refugees had begun residing in the Barracks, a cluster of abandoned buildings behind the central train station, in the spring of 2016 (Minca et al, 2019). At its peak, nearly 2,000 individuals lived in deplorable conditions within this makeshift camp during the harsh winter of 2016–17, including many unaccompanied children. Prior to the closure, civil society organizations identified a number of unaccompanied children within the Barracks, and subsequently the local Serbian Centres for Social Work (CSW) referred some of these children to the Obrenovac camp (BCHR, 2018a; UNHCR, 2018; see also Figure 8.2). However, shortly after this facility was opened, the Commissariat moved in 200 adult men, converting Obrenovac into a camp for refugees of all ages (UNHCR, 2018). This rendered the first attempt at realizing exclusive camp accommodation for children unsuccessful and exposed the children to different forms of risk, including smuggling and trafficking (BCHR, 2018b).

Figure 8.1: Serbian refugee camps and safe houses for unaccompanied children

Note: This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>, modified by Jessica Collins-Bojovic

Other children from the Barracks were relocated to Krnjača camp in Belgrade (see Figure 8.3). In Krnjača, they were housed in designated quarters to keep them separate from adult residents. However, due to a lack of appropriate safety measures (such as lockable doors), these children were still considered at risk by civil society organizations (BCHR, 2018a, 2018b). While these examples represent early attempts at establishing exclusive spaces for unaccompanied children within camps, the Commissariat was at the same time housing unaccompanied children with adults in other camps throughout the country (BCHR, 2018b).

In November 2018, the Commissariat established the first successful designated accommodation for unaccompanied children in Sjenica; subsequently, all registered unaccompanied children were moved to this camp located in an administrative building of a former textile factory, 270 km south-west of Belgrade. While the development of a designated camp

Figure 8.2: Space dedicated to refugee children in Obrenovac camp, 2018



Source: Claudio Minca

was welcomed, most organizations providing regular humanitarian and legal services to these children remained based in Belgrade, a four-hour drive from the camp (BCHR, 2018b, 2020a; UNHCR, 2019, 2020). Additionally, this initiative was met with hesitation by the children themselves, especially by those wanting to attempt ‘the Game’, as the camp’s location was less than ideal due to its distance from the northern and western border regions. Therefore, some children refused the accommodation and left Belgrade,

Figure 8.3: Krnjača camp, 2017

Source: Claudio Minca

while others concealed their age and claimed to be adults in an effort to be hosted in more ‘desirable’ camps. Some refused accommodation altogether and moved to makeshift camps, hostels or private flats, often arranged by smugglers, which exposed many to increased risks (UNHCR, 2019, 2020). It is worthwhile to note that while engagement with smugglers is often framed as exploitative, Luigi Achilli (2023) has stressed that interactions with smugglers by unaccompanied children can provide new forms of action and agency – and while this chapter does not explicitly focus on the relationship between minors and smugglers, elements of this type of relationship will become clear as we begin to uncover the driving forces in the decision making of unaccompanied children around accommodation and (im)mobility.

In early 2020, the Commissariat dedicated a second camp, Bogovađa, to unaccompanied children (BCHR, 2020b). The camp is a former Red Cross children’s resort roughly 70 km from Belgrade, a place much more accessible for organizations providing support to these children and based in the capital. While Sjenica and Bogovađa offered increased protection to these children, some had lived in Krnjača camp for over a year and had even begun integrating into the local community by attending the local primary school – transferring them therefore meant disrupting the precarious but effective points of reference in their everyday lives (BCHR,

2020b). In June 2022, 47 unaccompanied children were accommodated among various camps, with a majority housed in Bogovađa (19). However, it should be noted that, as of 2022, Bogovađa ceased to be a designated camp for unaccompanied children, although it still has separate spaces for their accommodation (UNHCR, 2022). At the same time, 26 unaccompanied children were housed across Serbia's five safe houses (e-mail correspondence with Refugee Aid Serbia, 1 July 2021).

Serbia's safe houses have the capacity to host roughly 55 unaccompanied refugee children. Three houses are located in Belgrade,³ one in Loznica⁴ and one in Niš⁵ (see Figures 8.1 and 8.4). Government-run safe houses have separate sections to accommodate refugee children, as they predominately accommodate Serbian children (BCHR, 2020b). By contrast, the NGO-managed safe houses were established to specifically accommodate unaccompanied refugee children.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, we therefore examine the role of local governance in accommodating and caring for unaccompanied children in Serbia by placing particular emphasis on the distinct spatialities of these accommodations and how children and local actors contribute to their use – including how they negotiate the use of the accommodation system in line with the children's own plans and needs. We bring these actors

Figure 8.4: Educational space for unaccompanied children at the Institute for the Education of Youth, Niš



Source: Refugee Aid Serbia. Reproduced with permission.

to the forefront of our analysis by specifically looking at the roles played by the CSW, civil society and even smugglers.

The local governance of care and protection for unaccompanied children

The specific localization and spatialities of accommodation, as highlighted earlier, are key components in the provision of protection to unaccompanied children in Serbia – however, the current system is limited and precarious in nature since it is heavily reliant on the local CSW and civil society and is frequently infringed upon by smugglers and manipulated by the refugees themselves. In this section, we aim to further interrogate the role of local actors and the limitations and precarities of the overall system of accommodating and caring for unaccompanied children and how these factors influence the journey of these children on the move.

The Centres for Social Work as a key form of local governance

The local Serbian CSW play a vital role in ensuring protection, accommodation and care for unaccompanied children, confirming Ilona van Breugel's (2020) observation that local-level governance, in some cases, does not solely represent a scale of policy *implementation* but also operates as an independent level of policy *development*. We particularly focus here on CSW responsibilities for accommodation assignment and for overseeing institutional guardianship. Once a refugee has been identified as underage and unaccompanied, local CSW assess the child's needs and determine whether accommodation in a camp or a safe house would best suit them (BCHR, 2020b). To accommodate them in a safe house, CSW consider the following factors: age, length of time in Serbia, vulnerabilities, such as physical or mental disabilities, and whether they may attend school (BCHR, 2020b). Typically, those under 14 years of age are assigned to safe houses, particularly if they are travelling alone or with younger relatives, while those travelling with older siblings or over 14 are usually accommodated within a camp (interview with InfoPark staff,⁶ 27 May 2021). While safe houses are determined to best suit the children's needs, the decision to accommodate them there is crucially influenced by both the availability of beds and the willingness of the child to live there, as a child cannot be forcibly moved to a safe house (or camp) (Milutinović, 2019).

With regard to institutional guardianship, each local CSW is responsible for assigning a guardian to the registered unaccompanied children in their municipality. A guardian is an independent individual responsible for ensuring the best interest of the child (Milutinović, 2019). It has often been the case that one guardian has been responsible for many children at once (Cekerevac

et al, 2018): for example, the, BCHR reported that for a period in 2020 two guardians were responsible for 302 children in Bogovađa camp (2020b). The Danish Refugee Council⁷ (DRC) has also expressed frustration at the insufficient number of assigned guardians:

Bogovađa and Sjenica are not the place for the accommodation of children ... You need to have specialized services in place. You need to have a proper assessment to work with the children. It's not possible to have 100 of them in one place, children who suffered certain kinds of violence or maybe some of them are trafficked. How can three social workers do the proper assessment? (DRC staff, 26 March 2021)

An additional concern is the required affiliation between the local CSW and the guardian, since, if a child is moved to a new municipality, as illustrated in the previous section, they will be appointed a new guardian. A Save the Children representative highlighted that 'the institute of the guardian primarily boils down to the finding and maintaining of accommodation ... frequent changes of accommodation of children often have nothing to do with the essential consideration of the best interest of the child, instead they are ad hoc solutions, related to migrant flows' (Milutinović, 2019: 12–13). According to these international organizations, the critical role played by this system of local governance in providing consistent care and developed relationships between guardians and children is too often disrupted as the movement of unaccompanied children between accommodations, often for logistical reasons, is quite common.

The role of local civil society in protecting refugee minors

Local governance also plays a vital role in the identification of and care for unaccompanied refugee children, as they provide critical legal and humanitarian support and are often the first to identify these children prior to their accommodation assignment by the local CSW. In our research into the grey literature, we have found that local civil society organizations have identified several factors of concern in the system of care for unaccompanied children in Serbia, including age determination, institutional guardianship, exploitation and risks of abuse (see, among others, Krasić et al, 2017; Milutinović, 2019; Jovanovic and Besedic, 2020). This section will look specifically at the issue of *age determination*. In *Forever 17*, Ulrike Bialas (2023) posits that age categorization within the European asylum centre acts as a technology of political compromise; however, scholarly knowledge of how refugees experience and negotiate these categorizations is yet to be comprehensively investigated. During our research, it emerged that age assessment and identification, the first step to being correctly accommodated

as an unaccompanied child, is sometimes avoided and/or used as a tool by refugees themselves. This is done to influence where they will be accommodated and the trajectory of their overall journey. These actions echo findings by Giacomo [Orsini et al \(2023\)](#) according to which children seeking asylum in Europe often declared a false adult age in order to escape control and move more quickly to another EU country; on the contrary, cases of the opposite were also reported – with minors being assigned an adult age due to mistrust in their declarations (2023: 196, 199). These phenomena highlight the importance of understanding the implications of age determination in countries of transit and the interplay between age determination, camps and mobility, where the acceptance or rejection of one's age may greatly influence the trajectory of the journey. In Serbia, the process of age assessment and identification of unaccompanied children has emerged as a pressing issue, particularly for how it is critically informed by refugees (of all ages) and their attempts to be assigned to a preferred camp – potentially at their own risk and/or at the risk of others. The rules around the procedure itself have been described as unclear and often implemented ad hoc, with different government bodies responsible for the formal assessment (typically the local CSW and/or the police), and civil society organizations often playing a fundamental role in the initial identification and subsequent advocacy of the child (interviews with Humanitarian Center for Integration and Tolerance [HCIT]⁸ [1 July 2021] and IDEAS Center for Research and Social Development, hereafter IDEAS⁹ [21 May 2021] staff). Civil society often fulfils this role due to the limited capacity of local CSW to enter the field quickly; however, this is frequently the source of logistical problems as civil society organizations are not permitted to provide transport to unaccompanied children, in this way generating a gap in the services when, for whatever reason, the local CSW cannot come to meet the child (HCIT staff, 1 July 2021). The result is that some children disappear before being registered.

Moreover, the registration of an identified unaccompanied child in the field is difficult due to the children's general lack of trust in institutions. IDEAS staff recalled such a situation:

They were seven or nine years old, we called the field social workers, the [CSW] ... we went there to check up on them every day, we brought them food and clothes, but they simply didn't want to be accommodated, no matter how many times we went there with an interpreter and told them that they can go on Game whenever they want, they simply didn't trust [us]. (Interview, 21 May 2021)

Further to this, once a refugee is registered, the resulting document becomes the official record of their age and is treated as if it was 'written in stone'.

Therefore, if a refugee child is registered as an adult, it is particularly difficult to change their status. Additionally, and in agreement with international standards, the procedure of assessment is largely reliant on the word of the refugee (InfoPark staff, 27 May 2021). This leaves a key aspect of accommodation in the hands of the child, who may be influenced to withhold or deny their status to take advantage of the system and pursue their own travel plans, often persuaded to do so by those who hold influence over them (as further discussed in the next section). Conversely, it also leaves the process open to refugees who are not children but wish to present themselves as such for their own benefit. DRC staff described the situation as follows:

If you say ‘I am a minor’, it will be written like that, then you will be referred to that institution. And, in some cases, it is obvious when you see the person, he is not a minor. And maybe you are exposing other children at risk. Maybe the person is a smuggler. Maybe that person can do harm to them. (Interview, 26 March 2021)

An InfoPark protection officer explained that adult refugees may do this as a way to gain access to accommodation that is more accessible to the Game (as most unaccompanied children at the time of interviewing were being placed within the Bogovađa camp); conversely, if they declared themselves to be an adult, they might be relocated to a camp in southern Serbia, far from the northern borders (27 May 2021). IDEAS staff described such practices as tolerated in most cases (interview, 21 May 2021). In circumstances where adults are moved to a refugee camp designated for children, the (actual) children become reliant on their personal communities within the camp for protection. For example, they join a group, often one that is distinguished by nationality, with a community leader providing essential protection (BCHR staff, 4 April 2021; on camp communities, see [Carter-White and Minca, 2020](#)).

By contrast, children may declare themselves to be over 18 when they are identified within the border regions since they refuse to be separated from their group (typically composed of adults) and feel protected and safe with them; to avoid separation, they may claim that the older men are their relatives (DRC, 26 March 2021; Jesuit Refugee Service [JRS], 9 June 2021; HCIT, 1 July 2021). Save the Children staff described the situation in Obrenovac camp like this:

We have kids in Obrenovac, usually for adult males, but we have kids there and we know they are minors. At times, some of those kids came to the camp because their smugglers told them to; because they had their networks there, so they could control them, but they had some really really bad experiences there. (Interview, 22 January 2021)

Obrenovac camp was frequently mentioned in our interviews with civil society members, as many undeclared children have been taken there or requested shelter from the camp at its gates:

Usually there are a lot of boys and young men who go to sleep there, but all of them complain about feeling unsafe, because they say that there are [refugee] gangs that are robbing them or attacking them. There is even some sexual abuse happening over the night. It's not a safe place. Some people go there because they have nowhere to go, but nobody's happy to be there. (InfoPark staff, 27 May 2021)

There is an awareness among the children of these safety concerns, and at times they realize that being in groups with older men raises safety concerns:

We had a group of boys who approached us and told us, 'Hey, we want to go to this camp for minors, because we don't feel safe here when we are outside. There are a lot of men who are a bit strange. We want to go to the camp. Okay?' (InfoPark staff, 27 May 2021)

The protection mechanisms in place for these groups can, however, be inhibited by the refugees themselves and by the decisions they make to continue their irregular journeys onward. Therefore, the designated spaces for unaccompanied children become, on the one hand, spaces of care and protection, and on the other, spaces to be manipulated in an effort to gain easier access to smugglers and increase their chances of success at the Game. Elsewhere, we have elaborated on the role of the camp as a custodial institution, in which its efforts to both care for and control its residents informed their (im) mobilities (see [Collins et al, 2024](#); [Carter-White and Minca, 2025](#)). In these cases, it is often civil society organizations that report on the aforementioned occurrences and provide monitoring in the field, confirming the growing role of local governance in providing first-hand support and accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers, a role noted in the literature focused on a putative 'local turn' in the governance of migration globally (see [Zapata-Barrero et al, 2017](#); [Caponio et al, 2018](#); [Glorius et al, 2019](#)).

Going 'for Game'

Throughout our research, we sought to further understand why unaccompanied children choose a particular kind of accommodation while in Serbia. We discovered that they are often influenced by smugglers and that distinct spatialities and localizations of the accommodation fit into their journey. As a starting point for our conversations with civil society

organizations, *accommodation* was frequently distinguished from *shelter*, especially when considering the care provided within these spaces:

[T]hey know that if they go to the camp, it is not just that they will have a roof over their head ... they will have some organizations with which they can talk, or they will have medical protection, or ... lawyers and legal protection. (InfoPark staff, 27 May 2021)

[T]he [refugee camps and safe houses] have three meals, they have accommodation, they have social protection, sometimes they get some money, some organizations have donor cards and that's the reason why they stay. (BCHR staff, 4 April 2021)

Formal accommodation is therefore accompanied by a level of care for its residents provided by camp and institutional staff and civil society working in these spaces, as well as by regular access to schooling if a child so chooses. Shelter, in the form of makeshift camps, smuggler accommodation or hostels, offers something completely different: a roof over their head and more convenient access to the border regions. Consequently, while camps and safe houses may indeed offer more protection, they lack the same freedom of movement and strategic localization of some of the more unstructured spaces. Despite occasional visits by various organizations, residence in these ad hoc shelters impacts the ability of the state and humanitarian organizations to protect these children.

As many children continue to choose informal shelter in exchange for increased freedom of movement, refugee camps and safe houses have strategically introduced 'unwritten rules' around mobility that acknowledge the importance of access to the Game for unaccompanied children and the possibility of being readmitted to a safe house after a failed attempt to cross the border (JRS staff, 9 June 2021). Similarly, unaccompanied children living in institutional camps are permitted to be absent from the camp for three to four nights at a time without losing their bed (interviews with former Krnjača camp residents). This demonstrates that the institutions are open to adapting to the needs of the refugees – and that they recognize that to provide protection they must allow some flexibility to the movement of their residents. Yet, despite being granted some freedom of movement, not all unaccompanied children will agree to live in formal accommodation. There are other trade-offs to be made, particularly in safe houses:

[I]t's easier [to live in a makeshift camp] if you want to go on Game. But also, they are aware of the situation in the [safe house]. You have some structure, control. Some of them are living too long without any control from anybody, parents, family, grandparents, whoever.

Of course, when you are a teenager, you don't want to be controlled ... [In the safe houses] they need to go to school, they have a lot of activities, they have something they need to do for that day. (JRS staff, 9 June 2021)

When a child agrees to live in formal accommodation, they opt for the care and structure that comes with those spaces. Our sources have highlighted the fact that safe houses are typically well staffed and generally pleasant environments (with spaces for eating together, learning and relaxing). Unfortunately, however, not every refugee camp offers the same level of care and protection as safe houses do. Within the camps, children may experience daily fights, robberies, verbal threats by adult men, the consumption of alcohol and the presence of smugglers (Milutinović, 2019: 18).

As previously mentioned, various factors influence the decisions of unaccompanied children on the move: from a lack of trust in the system to pressure on the part of their parents and/or smugglers who may encourage them to complete the journey quickly and avoid pausing within a camp or safe house:

I don't think smugglers specifically tell them to go to the camps, but they may tell them: 'Okay, we will not go for Game for the next week. So, you are free to do what you like. You can stay here, you can go to the camp, whatever' ... They give them some freedom to decide ... Usually, I don't think they specifically care about the wellbeing of the minors. But they might tell them: 'You can stay in this hostel, and you can cook for me while you stay there and wait for the Game.' They make some sort of deal. Or they tell them, 'Do whatever you need. Sleep outside, go to the camp, but you will go to Game next week.' (InfoPark staff, 27 May 2021)

This demonstrates the large role that smugglers and the associated freedom of mobility play in the decisions made by unaccompanied children about where to stay. For example, if their smuggler plans to try the Game in one week's time, it would be complicated and possibly unwise to register in a camp far from Belgrade. Therefore, the placement of designated camps for unaccompanied children in the south-west of the country, distant from the northern borders and from humanitarian support in Belgrade, poses a question related to the management of migration through the localization of camps in that their positioning may be counter to the protection needs of this vulnerable demographic. Additionally, due to the situation of some camps in remote areas, as children attempt the Game they may resort to moving between institutions for unaccompanied children, as well as those camps suited to adults, or even makeshift camps. Ultimately, for most

unaccompanied children, onward mobility is a key aspect in decision making and, therefore, must be fully considered by local actors when providing reception and care.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the importance of local governance in the geographically complex and dynamic accommodation system for unaccompanied children in Serbia. We have illustrated how this vulnerable group moves between camps, safe houses and informal makeshift dwellings as they attempt ‘the Game’, and how the management and organization of these spaces can be associated with a variety of risks linked to travelling as an unaccompanied child. We have also suggested that, at least in part, this is due to the localization of these camps away from border crossings. The specific geographies of the camps lead children to take greater risks, for instance by temporarily residing in makeshift camps closer to the border regions. What has clearly emerged is that local municipalities and civil society play a fundamental role in identifying unaccompanied children on the move and informing them about the options available to them, while both camps and safe houses have partially adjusted their rules and practices to acknowledge the desire of refugee children to attempt the Game while living in such places. We have also discussed how the refugees themselves tend to proactively engage with the local governance of migration and affect the system of support available to them – sometimes to their advantage – with many decisions around accommodation being directly informed by the Game. While there are various rules, recommendations and regulations at the highest levels related to the reception and care of unaccompanied children, the related practices reveal far more complex negotiations at the local level between these children and the CSW, civil society and even smugglers, and a set of informal practices that have somehow been incorporated within the management of camps and safe houses.

Overall, this chapter has shown that there are key local geographies at play in the management of this vulnerable group of refugees in Serbia. In such a complex and sensitive context, any single decision made by an individual refugee is in fact informed by a series of multiscalar considerations: (1) where in the country they want to be located, (2) what kind of mobility they want and (3) how they are influenced by their own geographical imaginations about the EU and its borders. This clearly results in unaccompanied refugee children engaging with vastly different types of spaces, each with serious implications for their safety and agency. This chapter is a preliminary and ongoing exploration of such practices in the Serbian context. Further work is necessary to closely analyse the daily life and conditions of unaccompanied children travelling along the

Balkan Route and the geographies of reception and care negotiated with relevant local institutions. By adopting a local lens to understand how this demographic and their accommodation is managed, we hope to have highlighted the importance of investigating the local governance of refugee children and emphasized how this dimension is essential to appreciate their need and desire for mobility.

Notes

- ¹ 'Unaccompanied and separated children' is the most encompassing term to describe this demographic of children along the Balkan Route; however, the term unaccompanied minor is also used in the literature (see [Krašić et al, 2017](#); [Jovanovic and Besedic, 2020](#))
- ² Some of these organizations sit under larger international organizations (for example Save the Children); however, in Serbia they are often managed at the regional or local level by predominantly local staff.
- ³ The Institute for Education of Children and Youth, commonly referred to as Vodovodska, and the Jovan Jovanovic Zmaj orphanage are managed by Serbian authorities; the Pedro Arrupe Integration House is managed by JRS, an international organization.
- ⁴ The 'House of Rescue', managed by Borderfree, a Swiss organization.
- ⁵ The Institute for Education of Youth, managed by the Serbian authorities.
- ⁶ InfoPark, a local humanitarian organization, provides services to refugees in Belgrade.
- ⁷ An international organization that provides various services to refugees throughout Serbian camps in cooperation with the Commissariat.
- ⁸ HCIT, a local humanitarian organization, provides support to refugees in northern Serbia.
- ⁹ IDEAS, a local civil society organization, maintains a large role in the protection and guardianship process of unaccompanied refugee children.

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An Unlikely Host in Humanitarian Reception: Fort McCoy during Operation Allies Welcome in the US

Erin Barbato

Introduction

The United States (US) has resettled around 3 million refugees since 1980, more than all other countries combined (Budiman, 2020). Yet, when it comes to supporting refugee populations within its borders, the US rarely incorporates the principles of a humanitarian government – unlike many developed countries, the US lacks reception centres, hotspots, refugee camps or public housing to accommodate people seeking refuge. Humanitarian government can be defined as the use of moral sentiments through government actions to address suffering and inequality (Fassin, 2007). When the US has incorporated humanitarianism, it has often turned to carceral humanitarianism, detaining more immigrants than any other country (Oliver, 2019). Although US law allows people seeking refuge to apply for asylum at an official port of entry (POE), the US southern border has become increasingly militarized and securitized over the past 30 years (Slack et al, 2016). When global crises have required the US to enact principles of humanitarian government to protect large numbers of refugees, it has instead created alternative routes for certain populations. For example, the US offered refuge to large numbers of people who fled communist regimes like Cuba and the Soviet Union (Espiritu, 2014). More recently, it evacuated the largest number of refugees since the fall of Saigon in Vietnam (Jordan, 2022). This chapter will evaluate the humanitarian government principles demonstrated in ‘Operation Allies Welcome’ (OAW), the operation that

evacuated over 120,000 Afghans from their home, transported 80,000 to the US and housed around 50,000 of them at eight military bases within the continental US.

OAW was an emergency evacuation and resettlement effort driven by the principles of a humanitarian government that was established by the Biden administration and overseen by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Its goal, based on emergency logic, was to ‘support vulnerable Afghans’, including many who worked alongside the US to fight the Taliban (DHS, 2021). The US was left with the choice of protecting its allies through an evacuation effort or leaving them to face persecution, including torture or death, as punishment for assisting the US government. The US chose to evacuate them.

US officials explained that the Taliban’s rapid takeover was unexpected and forced the US to act quickly (Thomas, 2021). This rapid response was made possible, in part, by the military infrastructure developed during the Second World War. Over the past 50 years, on a limited number of exceptional occasions and for temporary periods of time, the US has housed refugee populations on its military bases (Lieberman Lawry, 2022). Prior to OAW in 2021, the most recent example of the US incorporating principles of a humanitarian government on a large scale to receive people seeking refuge was after the Vietnam War. ‘Operation New Arrivals’ evacuated Vietnamese individuals who would have been in danger had they remained in the region. The first military installation on the US mainland to provide accommodations for Vietnamese evacuees, Camp Pendleton, housed over 50,000 refugees between April and August 1975 (Espiritu, 2014). While these humanitarian efforts have striking similarities, there are also notable differences.

As part of OAW in August 2021, the US government turned eight military bases into ‘Safe Havens’, creating spaces similar to humanitarian borders in the interior of the US. A humanitarian border is ‘a complex assemblage, comprising particular forms of humanitarian reason’, committed to governing migrants with needs to cross borders (Walters, 2011: 142). Although the incorporation of humanitarian principles in migration control policies is the subject of extensive academic research in the European Union (EU), Africa, the Middle East and Asia, the topic is less prevalent in the US (Pugh, 2004; Horsti, 2012; Aas and Gundhas, 2015; Campesi, 2014a, 2014b).

According to Michel Agier (2011: 201), ‘humanitarian government is the entity that constructs, manages and controls camps, everywhere that these are needed, in order to keep their populations who are viewed, simultaneously or alternatively, as vulnerable and undesirable, victims and dangerous’. Humanitarian border control policies are encompassed in what Didier Fassin has called ‘humanitarian government’, described as ‘the expression of a governmental rationality in which the administration of

human collectivities is carried out in the name of a higher moral principle which sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the high value of action' (Fassin, 2007: 151). Fassin (2007) explains that a humanitarian government is an expression of government rationality in which it acts in order to preserve life and alleviate suffering. However, acts of humanitarianism are not always motivated by purely altruistic intentions. Indeed, acts of humanitarianism may be rooted in political, self-interested justifications as well (Pandolfi, 2003; Nader and Savinar, 2016).

OAW offers a unique opportunity to assess recent humanitarianism implemented by the US government. The Safe Havens, without international borders, created areas quite similar to the humanitarian borders that Giuseppe Campesi (2014a) and others describe. The US simultaneously cared for its allies behind armed guards and fortified walls of military bases within the US. The increased securitization of borders and the emergence of a complex surveillance apparatus are key elements of contemporary repressive and restrictive migration regimes (Fassin, 2011). The humanitarian border precisely emphasizes the nexus between humanitarianism and securitization, protection and surveillance, care and control.

Ultimately, the US resettled 11 per cent of all people displaced from Afghanistan because of the US-led conflict there. Had it not evacuated 120,000 allies, their lives would have been at risk because of the support they provided to the US military during the war. By putting their lives in danger to assist the military, Afghans created a moral imperative the US found hard to ignore. Additionally, the country had a reputation to save: allies might be harder to find in the future if loyal Afghans were left behind to suffer persecution.

The unique nature of this situation cannot be overstated – those seeking refuge in the US usually endure a complicated, multi-year process without any interaction with local communities. In more common scenarios – for example, the standard resettlement process conducted through the United Nations (UN) and US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) – individuals often spend years living in a refugee camp (Connor et al, 2017). Upon arrival, these individuals are normally provided only with temporary resettlement support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, because many people seeking asylum cannot access USRAP resources, they are forced to travel to the US southern border to attempt crossing without authorization, or to request asylum at a POE. Asylum seekers may face mandatory detention as their asylum claim is processed, spending an average of 3.7 months in detention (Human Rights First, 2022). While not all asylum seekers face mandatory detention, those who are not detained are ineligible for work authorization for (at least) six months after requesting asylum, a time during which they are also denied any form of government benefit (American Immigration Council, 2022).

Without humanitarian intervention, thousands of Afghan allies would have had little hope of accessing protection in the US due an inability to physically arrive at a POE, which would have required a visa or a long journey to the US southern border through Mexico. Even if these allies had been able to physically arrive in Mexico to request asylum at the southern border, they would have been forced to wait in Mexico for months – if not years – while their applications were processed on account of Title 42 and the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP). Simply put, the only viable option was mass evacuation and resettlement of Afghan allies in the US.

The locations of the Safe Havens within the US allowed more individuals and communities to interact with this effort on a local level. This chapter will discuss the unique nature of the local actors interacting with Safe Havens. When examining local participation in the humanitarian government at the Safe Havens, this chapter discusses NGOs, government employees, community volunteers and veterans from the state of Wisconsin. Consideration of these local–Safe Haven interactions offers an important contribution to refugee studies: although immigration and refugee policy is often determined at the national level, government actors should leverage the good will and expertise of the local communities surrounding future Safe Havens. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates that effective local community engagement can meaningfully bolster the humanitarian principles in a government’s response to a migratory crisis in ways that purely national efforts cannot achieve alone. This chapter will in this way contribute to the further development of the conceptualization of the humanitarian government principles from a local perspective within the US. Initiatives to welcome refugees in the Safe Havens were all shaped by local responses, including xenophobic actors, as this area of the US is not accustomed to welcoming the stranger (Hinger, 2016). This chapter will explore the unique nature of the Safe Haven at Fort McCoy as a reflection of humanitarianism in middle America. It will also discuss the novel aspects of the US approach to protecting its Afghan allies by focusing on the unique nature of the interactions between the people seeking refuge and the local community.

Scholarship on refugee camp studies has focused on refugees’ relationship with the local community (van Breugel, 2020). Yet Fort McCoy offers a unique perspective. The Afghans at Fort McCoy interacted with locals supporting the humanitarian government within the walls of the military base. Local NGOs, veterans from Wisconsin and community members all volunteered to serve the Afghans at Fort McCoy. Locals offered the Afghan allies legal services, food, clothing and advocacy. In order to access Fort McCoy, local actors had to obtain military clearance, which at times limited who could serve in a humanitarian manner. Interactions between Afghans and locals at Fort McCoy were quite unconventional in the context of the

security of the military base and the lack of freedom of movement afforded to the Afghans.

This chapter will be organized as follows: first, it will present the ethical and methodological considerations on which this research is based. Second, it will discuss the creation of humanitarian-like borders via Safe Havens, which are intended to alleviate suffering through humanitarian governance when hosting Afghans. Third, it will consider the control and securitization components of Safe Havens. And fourth, it will conclude with an examination of the local populations hosting these individuals.

Ethics and methodology

This chapter is a research piece based on the material gathered during the author's work on site at Fort McCoy and in collaboration with other NGOs at the other Safe Havens. While the primary goal of the work I conducted with the Afghans at Fort McCoy was to provide legal information, guided by the ethics of my role as a lawyer, I also kept a keen eye on the ethics of conducting research with this vulnerable population. As Clinical Professor and Director of the Immigrant Justice Clinic at the University of Wisconsin Law School, I dedicate my career to the study and practice of immigration law. When working with the people we serve, I am abiding by rules of ethics governed by the Supreme Court Rules (SCR) of Professional Conduct for Attorneys (SCR chapter 20). My work in detention centres, migrant shelters and pro se clinics, including the one located at Fort McCoy, is governed by these professional rules of responsibility. While my main role is as an attorney, research is often part of my work. Due to the combination of lawyering and research, I aim to comply with the Code of Ethics, always emphasizing the importance of voluntary, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy and the principle of 'doing no harm'. The ultimate goal of all my work, whether lawyering or researching, is to alleviate harm and be of service to refugee-like communities that I encounter around the world. I have witnessed first hand how US policy towards people seeking refuge generally prioritizes detention and deterrence rather than protection and welcome. While producing research is the primary goal of many conducting work in refugee settings, as a lawyer and professor, my intention is always to be of service, with the goal of providing benefits to the Afghans living at Fort McCoy. The work I conduct with people in refugee situations is never to benefit my own career, which eliminates many ethical issues that researchers encounter in similar situations (Mackenzie, 2007).

As a result of my personal experience at Fort McCoy, this chapter's discussion of OAW highlights the conditions of reception on this particular Safe Haven. Additionally, this chapter offers a spatial analysis of Fort McCoy, ethnographic research of Afghans living there and personal observations.

My work at Fort McCoy included providing legal information to people from Afghanistan about their potential pathways to legal status in the US. Every person I met with individually was informed of the confidentiality of the information they shared with me. This information is confidential and protected by the ethics of my law licence. The information shared in this chapter does not include any confidential information. The analysis in this chapter incorporates direct experience with the reception of refugees in the US, informal discussions and formal discussions with NGOs, as well as information from peer-reviewed articles, press releases and policy papers.

The empirical research I conducted at Fort McCoy recognized an obligation to design and conduct this research with the aim of alleviating harm by providing legal information to the Afghans and addressing challenges people faced while at Fort McCoy while keeping an eye on the potential of Fort McCoy being used as a quasi-detention centre in the future, as it had been in the past (Mackenzie, 2007). The ethics of the practice of law encompass confidentiality, honesty and respecting conflicts of interest. In order to build trust, I concentrated on confidentiality, family reunification options and follow through on requests for services beyond their legal needs (Mackenzie, 2007). A major issue was that the pathway to legal status in the US was unclear for many without further guidance from the US government.

By being physically present at Fort McCoy, I could address the issues that I witnessed, including lack of legal information, with government officials, non-government officials and media to ensure they were aware and addressed these shortcomings if possible. When I met with Afghans at Fort McCoy, they voluntarily sought me out as they wanted to discuss their potential immigration options in the US and the refugee resettlement process. All of this was conducted with a firm understanding of the emergent situation and trauma that many of the Afghans experienced after their emergency evacuation.

Creating a humanitarian border within the US at the military reception centre at Fort McCoy

The OAW Safe Haven at Fort McCoy differs strikingly from standard US immigration detention. Humanitarianism was reflected in the policies of Fort McCoy as well as in the services provided to Afghans, which is usually not the case when it comes to the policies and services provided in standard US immigration detention centres. In this section, I intend to show that the US government constructed a humanitarian border surrounding the Afghans living at Fort McCoy within the interior of the US, around 290 km from the two closest international airports in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Minneapolis, Minnesota. This is truly a unique location to host people seeking refuge.

OAW, under the direction of the DHS, created a Unified Coordination Group (UCG). The UCG was tasked with implementing a range of services, including initial processing, COVID-19 testing and isolation, vaccinations, additional medical services and legal screening and support for individuals who were neither US citizens nor lawful permanent residents (LPRs). Evacuated US citizens, LPRs and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders could leave the airport to start their lives in the US once they finished processing at the POE. US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) admitted Afghans who were in the process of applying for an SIV and other vulnerable Afghan allies via humanitarian parole. Then, the US military transported these Afghans to a Safe Haven. The Department of Defense (DOD) designated eight Safe Havens: Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia; Fort Barfoot, Virginia; Fort Gregg-Adams, Virginia; Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Bliss, Texas; Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey; and Camp Atterbury, Indiana (DHS, 2021).

CBP admitted most of the displaced Afghan nationals through humanitarian parole. This allowed evacuated Afghans to stay in the US temporarily for at least two years rather than force them through the usual backlogged refugee process. Prior to admission, Afghan nationals went through a screening process in Germany, Kosovo or Qatar (DHS, 2021). Once in the US, they were brought to one of eight Safe Havens located at US military bases throughout the US. Afghan allies thus circumvented the standard refugee resettlement process conducted through the UN and USRAP, which would have required a substantially longer wait outside of the US.

The US created SIV in 2012 specifically for Afghans who worked with the US military, often as interpreters (Payne, 2019). However, the process was plagued with delays and inefficiencies – many endured years of waiting or faced unfair denials (Payne, 2019). Thus, when the US withdrew from Afghanistan, many of its allies were unable to leave and were persecuted by the Taliban for assisting the US.

Although the Safe Havens did not have official international borders, as humanitarian borders traditionally do, they very much resemble what William Walters (2011: 142) describes as ‘a complex assemblage, compromising particular forms of humanitarian reason’ while governing a population on the move. From August 2021 through February 2022, over 12,000 Afghans lived at Fort McCoy (a 60,000-ac military base located in west-central Wisconsin) while waiting for the US and Wisconsin governments, as well as NGOs, to provide housing, food, legal services and resettlement assistance (Hesson, 2021).

After receiving clearance and official military identification, I drove through the gates of Fort McCoy for the first time in September 2021. The process of entering felt similar to the process of crossing an international

border. What I witnessed was difficult to comprehend. I have worked in many immigrant detention centres and emergency intake sites. However, this was nothing like what I had witnessed previously. Hundreds of Afghans were walking the streets of a military base and living behind guarded walls and fences in barracks, surrounded by soldiers in uniform and military equipment. I will never forget the little girls I saw who were playing on improvised swings they had made from bedsheets tied to branches of small trees near their barracks.

The military trains more than 100,000 soldiers annually on this base. While it has been used primarily as a military training centre since it was built in 1909, it has also been used to detain people. During the Second World War, it interned around 170 Japanese Americans and 120 German American and Italian American civilians after the government deemed them potentially dangerous ‘enemy aliens’. The US also held 4,000 German and Japanese prisoners of war at Fort McCoy (Scott, 2010). While the US now recognizes the inhumanity of the internment camps, ‘humanitarianism’ in the US nevertheless still focuses on detention and deterrence (Oliver, 2019).

Immigrant detention in the US prohibits asylum applicants from incorporating into their communities and ensures that deportation of individuals remains feasible by eliminating their freedom of movement and restricting their access to public life (Mohamed, 2022). While the EU has immigrant detention centres, many asylum seekers arrive in reception centres (Nettelbladt and Boano, 2019).

The US prefers immigrant detention where there is little access to the outside world, and this includes detention facilities for families and unaccompanied minors. OAW reflected an increased focus on the component of care and the alleviation of pain for people seeking refuge in the US. One could argue that immigrant detention centres are a form of humanitarian government as the government provides housing, food and clothing. However, the housing is a prison or jail, the food is what is offered to people convicted of crimes (and lacks consideration of cultural needs) and the clothing is a prison uniform. Since the US detains children, it is nearly impossible to paint this treatment of dedicated allies and their families in a favourable light.

Nevertheless, OAW and Fort McCoy offered much more to Afghan allies than they would otherwise have received at a standard immigrant detention centre, while waiting outside the US at a refugee camp or while out of detention in the US but without any government support. For example, while the US has family detention centres that allow parents convicted of a crime to be detained with their children, the US immigrant detention system does not allow family units to remain intact. Often, Immigration Customs Enforcement or CBP will separate family members by sending them to different detention centres, sometimes thousands of miles away

from one another. By contrast, at Fort McCoy, families were able to live together – albeit in communal living in military barracks. Initial reports stated that the military bases were ill prepared to meet the needs of the Afghans (Redman, 2021), who were forced to wait hours in line for meals, were not provided sufficient clothing and lived in communal barracks that offered little to no private space. During the pandemic, communal living created a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19. Families that lived in their own houses and apartments in Afghanistan were forced to live in close quarters with others, causing more stress and, at times, conflict (Redman, 2021). After a few weeks, Fort McCoy's operations appeared more efficient and beneficial to the Afghan guests.

NGOs contracting with the military also provided services via OAW that are generally not available to asylum seekers in the US (Hesson, 2021). The Afghans had access to clothing, toiletries and other household amenities through donations or supplies from the US military. Eventually, Fort McCoy offered a computer lab, indoor soccer facilities, a recreation centre, mental health services and a sewing room. The materials for the sewing room were mostly donated by people living in Wisconsin. Catholic charities set up a recreation centre for the children to do crafts, play sports and socialize (Redman, 2021) – though every day I worked at Fort McCoy, the little boys would ask me for 'a ball'. Volunteers were not permitted to provide anything directly to the Afghans. The children were without school every day, and I witnessed many of them seeking activities and entertainment. Walters states that a 'humanitarian zone can materialize in various situations – in conflict zones, amidst the relief of famine, and against the backdrop of state failure' (Walters, 2011). The US evacuation of Afghanistan is largely viewed by US citizens as a failure of the US government. Fort McCoy serves as a humanitarian border that was built within the national borders of the US to protect the individuals that the US failed during the evacuation and overall conflict. The Safe Haven at Fort McCoy offers the opportunity to discuss the US expression of humanitarianism following an evacuation that left allies in direct harm.

I provide limited legal services at a small number of immigrant detention centres, but most people in immigration detention have little to no access to attorneys or legal information. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops established legal clinics in the Safe Havens. Afghans could seek information and legal counselling at these centres. At times, as an attorney, this was difficult to do, as the legal process for the Afghans was often unclear. The legal clinic volunteers at Fort McCoy could explain the potential process for applying for asylum, but many Afghans hoped to receive SIVs or another form of expedited processing. Often, legal volunteers encouraged the Afghans to wait for resettlement before starting any formal immigration process.

OAW illustrates the US' most recent expression of humanitarian government principles in that it created Safe Havens resembling humanitarian

borders within the US. For example, US Citizenship Immigration Services (USCIS) arrived at Fort McCoy to facilitate Afghans' applications for Employment Authorization Documents (EADs). By the time the allies departed Fort McCoy, most had a valid EAD that allowed them to work and provided a government-issued form of identification. This service is not available to those in immigrant detention – asylum seekers in the US are not immediately eligible for authorization to work. Had USCIS not provided services at Fort McCoy to process the EADs, many of the Afghans would have moved on without eligibility to work.

While most Afghans expected to be living in their new communities within weeks of arrival, that was not the reality for most at Fort McCoy. Autumn in Wisconsin is blessed with mild temperatures, stunning foliage and sunny days. As winter approaches, the weather is often snowy, windy and, at times, dangerously cold. Organizations at Fort McCoy encouraged the Afghans to get warm clothing, winter jackets, wool socks and winter boots to prepare for this weather. Humanitarian government principles guided the US in OAW, including securitization.

Based on the principles of 'carceral geography' that Jennifer Turner discusses, Fort McCoy falls within her definition of a 'buffer zone' (Turner, 2018). Turner describes a 'buffer zone' as a de facto border spatially and temporally distant and distinct from a formally recognized international border (Turner, 2018). Fort McCoy offered more freedom to the Afghans than traditional carceral detention, where people are forced to live behind bars and wear prison uniforms. Fort McCoy allowed the US government to put Afghans evacuees in a 'buffer zone' that entailed aspects of a carceral environment while staying away from traditional punitive conditions (Turner, 2018). The next section will discuss the main themes of securitization evident at Fort McCoy. Indeed, the Safe Haven at Fort McCoy is an example of the nexus between humanitarianism and detention-like settings in the US. Fort McCoy – which offers more freedom – does differ from traditional immigrant detention centres in the US that are carceral in nature. The securitization surrounding Fort McCoy allowed a more open environment within the barbed-wire fences and tall walls surrounding the base while still offering the wide range of services and aid provided to Afghan evacuees.

The securitization of the Safe Haven

OAW was an opportunity for the US to create a system of refugee reception that did not mirror jail or prison. While the Safe Haven at Fort McCoy was designed to provide Afghans with more freedom than standard immigration detention, individuals still faced serious restrictions and were separated from the outside world. The US immigration system does not normally embody

spaces that allow family units to remain united during a transition or vetting process. Migrant detention in the US at times involves ‘family detention’. For example, the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas, at times, has enough beds for 2,000 women and children. If a father or husband arrived at the southern border of the US with a wife and children, the man would be detained in a separate facility. The US has also used Karnes Detention Facility to detain fathers and children, when the mother was not travelling with the family. The US government allowed family units to remain together at the Safe Havens, even allowing non-traditional families units to remain together. For example, an aunt travelling with her ten-year old nephew, who lost his mother in the war, were not separated at Safe Havens. While on the southern border of the US, CBP separated the nephew and his aunt, treating the child as an unaccompanied minor. However, the securitization of the Safe Havens remained visible and evident, even as family units often remained intact.

The military, US government, NGOs and volunteers were at Fort McCoy to provide necessary services to the Afghans, but their freedom was greatly limited. The Safe Haven structure allowed the US to continue to help the ‘distant stranger’, as the Afghans remained within military bases, separated from the local community (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020). While control often ignites negative sentiment within mainstream understanding of humanitarianism (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020), the Safe Havens offered a sense of security to those in the surrounding community who may have been apprehensive about their new neighbours (despite these neighbours having fled as a result of US involvement in their own communities in Afghanistan). The Safe Havens also offered protection for the Afghan evacuees living there, as mass shootings and hate crimes are not all that uncommon in the US including at military installations, which have proved vulnerable to mass shootings (Bates, 2019).

OAW provided the US with an opportunity to establish refugee reception centres without a carceral feel or structure. While that seemed to have been the intention – since the Safe Haven at Fort McCoy did offer freedom of movement within the base – the armed military guards, high walls and barbed wire surrounding it meant Afghan people did not have freedom of movement outside the base. Even though the Afghans housed at Fort McCoy were not legally forced to remain inside the base once they passed a background check, its location and the consequences of early departure prevented most from leaving. Over the years, increasingly restrictive, securitized and militarized border regimes have rendered transnational migration a riskier and deadlier endeavour for migrants worldwide (Williams, 2015), highlighting to the US government that evacuation was the only choice to save these lives. While humanitarianism is premised on the ideology that every individual deserves relief from suffering, when deployed by state actors it ‘simultaneously upholds

the territorialised framework of differential rights upon which border enforcement is based' (Williams, 2016: 34). While the Afghan evacuees living at Fort McCoy were regarded as 'allies', the location of the Safe Haven on a military base illustrates the focus on securitization, which would normally seem unnecessary for allies.

If the Afghans departed prior to a match with a resettlement agency, they risked losing their resettlement benefits. Fort McCoy offered amenities that resembled a small city, including communal housing, a car wash, a gas station, restaurants, a grocery shop, a community centre, baseball fields, a skiing hill and even a campground (Associated Press, 2021). The Afghans generally travelled on foot throughout the base, although buses were available at times. The sheer size of the base made access to the outside world unfeasible. To leave, an Afghan would potentially need to walk miles to the main entrance. Even if they successfully walked to the main entrance, they would find themselves on a country highway 13 mi from the nearest city. There is no public transportation. Calling a taxi or an Uber would be difficult and expensive to most, and remaining at Fort McCoy offered the Afghans future protection and benefits in the outside world that were not accessible to them while in the Safe Haven.

The US military and NGOs on the base discouraged Afghans from departing prior to matching with a refugee resettlement agency, especially if they did not have family that could support them. Many Afghan evacuees believed they would depart Fort McCoy expeditiously, but several remained for six months – during which time they lived without knowing when they would leave, where they would live or whether they would be able to stay in the US indefinitely.

Although Fort McCoy resembled a small city in some ways, it was also quite clearly an active military base. Many soldiers were at Fort McCoy after enlisting for a humanitarian assignment versus other regular military assignments. However, there were other soldiers there solely for official military training. It was a common occurrence to see tanks driving on the roads through Fort McCoy and hear loud sounds of military exercises, right next to Afghan children hanging from trees on swings they made with their white bedsheets. Agier argues there is an obvious connection 'between [the] humanitarian world (the hand that cares) and the police and military ordering (the hand that strikes)' (2011: 5). While the Afghans living at Fort McCoy lived outside the walls of a detention centre, they lived within the walls of a military base. While they could walk the streets within the military base, they could not walk the streets of the neighbouring communities without consequences. Although the US often uses carceral tactics to control new arrivals seeking asylum, the securitization measures within Fort McCoy remained evident and palpable.

The US, while implementing humanitarianism, still kept the allied 'strangers' at a distance in Safe Havens – the Afghan people had limited

freedom of movement and restricted access to the outside world, making the spaces geographically contained (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020). The lack of control and isolation many felt while living in the Safe Havens frustrated many of the people I met. The temporary nature of their living situation may have made it bearable for the allies, but only with the accompanying hope that they would soon find a home in the US. However, it also impeded the Afghans' ability to start a life in the US.

Most of their days were filled with waiting. They waited for medical and biometric clearance. Then, they waited for a match with a refugee agency or the processing of their immigration paperwork. They had little to no choice regarding what city they would be resettled in, further constraining their freedom of movement and highlighting their lack of control. Many wanted to resettle near Washington, DC and Sacramento, California. Sadly, those refugee resettlement agencies were at capacity, limiting their choices. Their lives were dominated by joblessness and long hours of seeking information and resources from various authorities and offices. Because I provided information about immigration, most of the people I met wanted to know how to apply for asylum or SIV in the US, as well as how long they would need to wait for resettlement. This information was not readily available for most – because of the irregular process in which the Afghan evacuees arrived, this was still a work in progress.

Furthermore, the US government recognized that many US citizens were worried the expedited vetting process might permit terrorists or criminals to enter the US. By strategically placing the Afghans on military bases, the US ensured they were separated by walls, fences and distance from the US public. Polls showed that most US citizens wanted to welcome the Afghan allies, but many had fears (Solender, 2021).

Fort McCoy was an attempt to alter the usual balance between the principles of humanitarianism and securitization in US immigration policy. However, while Afghan people had freedom of movement within Fort McCoy, the securitization of the base created a nearly impermeable border. Nevertheless, this border has not prevented the local population from supporting the evacuees who were displaced at Fort McCoy. An analysis of Fort McCoy on a local scale highlights the involvement of a range of actors in support of the Afghans, such as veterans, whose role has not yet been highlighted in the literature on refugee reception.

The power of US veterans and other civilians in promoting humanitarian principles to the evacuated Afghans

The creation of the Safe Haven at Fort McCoy spurred strong reactions from the community. While many political leaders expressed concerns,

fear and even anger, others, such as military members, veterans and local community members, expressed genuine concern and generosity and stepped up in a variety of ways to support the Afghans in their community. The short timeline of the existence of Safe Havens hindered the research available to examine the relationship of the Afghan people as part of the local community and exceeded the scope of this specific research. Refugee camp studies have often focused on the incorporation with the local city or town (van Breugel, 2020). The political terrain paired with the lack of exposure that Wisconsinites have to refugees could have created an unwelcoming and potentially dangerous environment. These challenges are not uncommon as Sophie Hinger discussed when describing the accommodation centres for refugees in the inner-city of Rosenplatz neighbourhood in north-west Germany (Hinger, 2016). While the local community offered a ‘plethora of support initiatives’, commonly described as ‘volunteering for refugees’, relying on the local community to support this Safe Haven was not a given because of the xenophobia that plagues this part of the US. The vocal and sincere support of the veteran community was powerful and effective, illustrating unprecedented and unique humanitarianism expressed by the local community of veterans and changing the narrative of a stranger to an ally.

Due to the physical location of Fort McCoy, the Afghans had little to no interaction with an actual US city or town. Fort McCoy is in politically conservative Monroe County. This fuelled an – at times damaging – political discourse on the part of conservatives, who villainized the Afghan evacuees as potential terrorists (Schulte, 2021). Wisconsin’s northern location means its residents are rarely, if ever, exposed to large numbers of refugees, since people seeking asylum in the US generally present themselves at the southern border. Although Wisconsin is close to the Canadian border, the US has a ‘Safe Third Country’ agreement that requires people seeking refuge to remain in Canada to seek asylum. Additionally, few migrants live in Wisconsin – of its 5.8 million residents, only 5 per cent are foreign-born. However, many US military and veterans, who are often conservative, advocated for the acceptance of the new Afghan populations and their humane resettlement. For example, the first time I visited Fort McCoy, I drove into the parking lot next to the Welcome Centre to see a man, probably in his early 80s, wearing a T-shirt that read ‘US Veteran’. He stood next to a red Ford F-150 pickup truck filled with clothing and other supplies to donate to the Afghan people living there. This scene illustrates the powerful involvement of veterans and the local community in supporting the Afghans through humanitarian acts.

The ‘local’ community for Afghan people at Fort McCoy was a combination of US veterans and the many civilians involved in service, donations and advocacy. The Afghans living temporarily at Fort McCoy also became a temporary part of the local community. While they remained

behind the barb-wired fence inside Fort McCoy, their presence in this area was palpable and impactful. I would argue the ‘local’ community was impacted in powerful ways by the presence of the Afghan community that will last for generations. Compassion extended further than federal and state actors, pouring out from veterans and other community members who were determined to channel the ‘moral force’ of the issue in productive ways (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020).

Research shows that placing people in detention-like facilities elicits unnecessary fear from the local community, as the very nature of these facilities implies that those living inside are dangerous (Campesi, 2015). The veterans acting as humanitarian agents for the Afghan allies offered a trusted and respected point of view, allowing what could have been an apprehensive community to act with a higher moral obligation. In 2018, the author met Jason Church, a US veteran from Wisconsin who had fought in Afghanistan and lost the lower portion of both legs to an improvised explosive device. He was a student in my immigration law class. On one of the last days of class, Jason gave a presentation about applying for his Afghan interpreter to obtain an SIV, a difficult, arduous but ultimately successful mission. With the arrival of Afghans in Wisconsin, Jason spoke publicly about his support and his opinion that Wisconsin would offer a warm welcome to the Afghan evacuees. On 9 September 2021, Mr Church, a registered Republican politician, gave an emotional speech saying that the anti-Afghan messages he was seeing in the media ‘rocks me to the core’. When speaking of the Afghan people arriving in Wisconsin, he said:

We need to embrace them. The ones that come here and have fought for their country and love their country and who were betrayed by the actions I’m seeing on TV today. You owe it to them and you owe it to us, all of us who have bled over there and who have seen their brothers and sisters in arms die. We all owe it to them and to us. I implore you all ... that we don’t isolate them, don’t treat them like second class citizens. We treat them like the Americans I went over and fought in Afghanistan to die for. It’s about time this country grew up. This place is amazing. It’s worth fighting for ... prove it to us. It’s worth dying for. I ask you all as these events unfold over the next months to keep what I have said in mind. (Piwowarczyk and McBride, 2021)

His Afghan interpreter is now a US citizen. Not all members of the military were able to successfully obtain SIVs for the Afghans they worked with (Piwowarczyk and McBride, 2021). Mr Church knew that there were many others deserving of the protections the US promised them. He used his voice and privilege to ignite the moral principles of the people of Wisconsin.

While Wisconsin witnessed many veterans offering their support for this community, a few Republicans voiced fear and xenophobia. Republican Tom Tiffany, the most outspoken regarding his fear, often argued that the Afghans evacuees were not properly vetted and Fort McCoy lacked proper security. ‘The parole authority is granted to the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. He can just wave people in’, he explained, charging the administration with ‘circumventing the SIV process’ (Schulte, 2021). His comments stoked fears of unvetted terrorists freely roaming the US, which, obviously, was not the reality of the situation (Schulte, 2021).

US Senator Ron Johnson, a conservative Republican from Wisconsin, also stoked fears regarding the vetting of loyal allies arriving at Fort McCoy. He questioned the speed with which evacuated Afghans were vetted. At a news conference on 25 August 2021, following the arrival of around 1,000 Afghan people at Fort McCoy, he stated:

There are people who are being transported that don’t have any ID whatsoever. I don’t know the full extent because I think there is so much chaos. But it was a point that we were making with [Major General Darrell Guthrie] and the State Department and Department of Homeland Security personnel here, is that puts an even greater burden on their shoulders to evaluate and vet and try to identify those individuals that they are going to be taking care of here. (Kirwan, 2021)

Democratic Governor Tony Evers called their concerns ‘dog whistle crap’ (Bauer, 2021). Adding fuel to the fire, in September 2021 two Afghan men were arrested at Fort McCoy. One of them, a 20-year-old man, was charged with engaging in sexual acts with a minor (Bauer, 2021). The other, a 32-year-old man, was charged with committing acts of domestic violence against his wife. Senator Johnson responded to these arrests by tweeting ‘This is precisely why I have asked, and continue to ask, the administration about their vetting process and repeatedly raised the issue regarding Ft. McCoy’ (Bauer, 2021). US Representative Scott Fitzgerald, also from Wisconsin, tweeted ‘Gov. Evers thinks concerns about the refugees are “dog whistle crap”. These are precisely the concerns many have about the vetting process. Evers should get his head out of the sand and pay attention’ (Bauer, 2021).

While the veterans and politicians voiced support and concern, local community support was evident. People from around the state of Wisconsin drove hours to Fort McCoy with truckloads of clothing and supplies. A woman who lived in Madison, Wisconsin collected fabric and sewing machines which would allow the Afghan people to make their own clothing (Hamer, 2021b). Catholic charities and the Salvation Army established donation sites in many cities in Wisconsin, allowing community members to donate new and gently used clothing. People from across the state of

Wisconsin volunteered their time and resources to help welcome the Afghan community.

The DOD interacted with local NGOs as well as local governments. While immigration law is controlled exclusively by the federal government in the US, some cities and counties have acted within their powers to welcome immigrants, including the Afghan evacuees. Under Governor Evers, the state of Wisconsin expanded its services for refugees throughout the entire state. They worked at Fort McCoy to identify needs. For example, there were children at Fort McCoy who needed emergency medical treatment. The Governor's Office provided housing and support, allowing the families to live at the Ronald McDonald House in Madison, Wisconsin and live as a family unit while the children received necessary treatment ([Ronald McDonald House Charities, 2022](#)). Dane County, under the direction of Executive Joe Parisi, allocated \$65,000 to serve the Afghans in their community. In a statement, Parisi highlighted that:

it is imperative that the Dane County area be prepared to address their immediate and unique needs, as our new neighbors migrate from military encampments and into our community ... These funds will give some of our valued service agency partners the resources they need to help make this transition successful for those settling in Dane County. ([Hamer, 2021a](#))

The news of the Afghan evacuees living at Fort McCoy spread throughout the state, allowing surprising actors to welcome the new community members. To bring some of this joy to the Afghans, the Madison Ballet performed their traditional Christmas show at Fort McCoy ([Everett, 2021](#)). On the night of the first performance, the Afghan families were treated to a Russian ballet, *The Nutcracker* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, performed by the Madison Ballet and Symphony Orchestra ([Everett, 2021](#)). A local girl who performed in *The Nutcracker* found the experience to be 'very inspirational'. Her father had emigrated from Afghanistan in the 1980s: 'I feel very privileged to get to perform in front of the Afghans', she said. 'I'm just grateful that they liked it. It's almost like I'm telling them not to give up on their dreams' ([Robinson, 2021](#)). The local actors contributed to enacting humanitarian principles through their overt acts of service, volunteerism and advocacy, especially from veterans.

Conclusion

This chapter evaluates the US government's humanitarian principles that encompass the emergent response to the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, forcing the US to act to protect the lives of allies and others the US found

deserve protection. The process of the US welcoming evacuated Afghan allies into Fort McCoy through OAW presented many similarities to regions known as ‘humanitarian borders’. The study of Afghans’ experience at Fort McCoy during OAW, therefore, presents a unique opportunity to analyse US refugee policy and the local community response from a humanitarian government perspective that is underdeveloped in academia. Local actors rarely have exposure to people seeking refuge. The Safe Havens opened the door to examine and assess local actors participating in humanitarian government efforts, a rare occurrence in the US. OAW demonstrated an increased commitment by the US government and local actors to provide a humanitarian response to this specific crisis involving US allies. Indeed, the US government and local actors stepped up to provide essentials like food, housing, clothing, legal services and resettlement assistance in a manner that stands in stark contrast to standard US immigration and refugee resettlement policy. The Safe Haven at Fort McCoy offers a new and unique example of humanitarianism on a local level logistically organized by the US military and morally supported by veterans, former members of the US military. The literature on humanitarianism has little focus on the US. OAW offers an opportunity to develop the literature to include this unprecedented act of humanitarianism by the US government which incorporated a unique local perspective.

The research conducted at Fort McCoy and OAW offers a distinctive opportunity to examine the US government’s humanitarian government principles put into place within the borders of the country. Due to the heavy US reliance on immigrant detention to house those seeking protection in the US, the ‘buffer zone’ that Fort McCoy created provided an unprecedented opportunity to analyse the US’ balance in protecting Afghan allies while considering protections for local communities. Although OAW afforded greater freedom of movement to Afghan allies than the standard US policy of immigrant detention, Afghans housed at Fort McCoy nevertheless had their freedom of movement greatly restricted. Even after passing a background check, the consequences of leaving Fort McCoy prior to being matched with a resettlement agency kept most Afghans from leaving. Afghan allies were separated from the US public by walls, fences and armed soldiers in uniform.

This focus on ‘securitizing’ Afghan refugees in this manner was a form of Safe Haven structure. It meant that the US military, government, NGOs and local volunteers could collaborate at Fort McCoy to help the ‘distant stranger’. Restriction of movement (appropriately) often generates negative sentiment. In this scenario, the Safe Haven structure – although not ideally implemented – offered at least two benefits. First, recalling the limited refugee population in Wisconsin due to its geographic location and its highly polarized political context, the Safe Haven structure protected the Afghans living there. Additionally, it also provided assurances to those Wisconsinites who were

unnecessarily fearful of Afghans (again, at least in part, due to Wisconsinites' limited exposure to refugee populations because of its location).

OAW's heavy emphasis on securitization and vetting also meant that other aspects of refugee resettlement – especially initially – were overlooked. The improvements made at Fort McCoy over time (for example, increased availability of culturally appropriate food and clothing, recreational facilities, mental health and at least *some* legal services), while not perfect, still reflect an increased emphasis on 'humanitarian government' principles.

Fort McCoy's involvement in OAW also highlights how important it is for policy makers and implementers to fully leverage resources from the local community where refugees are housed. Local veterans' support provided reassurance to a community whose fears had been stoked by partisan-motivated actors. Catholic charities facilitated a recreation centre for children that was not only beneficial for the children but also allowed the US government to allocate its valuable human capital elsewhere. It also likely reduced conflict, further limiting expenditure of government resources. Wisconsinites' passion for knitting through the winter resulted in one local woman collecting most of the fabric and machines necessary to establish a sewing centre. Another example discussed in this chapter: that local immigration attorneys and law students were allowed on site meant that USCIS officers could more efficiently and effectively carry out their visit. Their presence was fundamental, as it helped to clarify the legal situation of the Fort McCoy residents and to encourage their eventual departure from the military base to settle in the US.

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Non-Care in the Detention Hotel: 20 Years of Australia's Use of 'Alternative Places of Detention'

Andrew Burridge

Introduction

As part of its vast detention landscape, the Australian government has officially used hotels, motels and other forms of non-purpose-built accommodation to detain asylum seekers, refugees and immigration deportees since 2002. Although the use of hotels over the past two decades for closed immigration detention is not unique to Australia – being evidenced most notably in North America – it appears that this practice has been at a scale and duration not witnessed anywhere else. Detaining persons within hotels – classified as 'alternative places of detention' or 'APODs' by the Australian government – has, however, remained relatively unknown in contrast to the use of purpose-built detention centre facilities.

This chapter examines the development and implementation of APODs within the broader Australian detention landscape, initially promoted as a means to remove women and children from detention facilities and to provide access to medical and other care within the community.¹ Drawing upon detainee accounts, media reporting, independent inquiries and official inspections of these sites, it is argued that APODs can be more accurately understood as sites of *non-care* (Inda, 2022). In this chapter, APODs, specifically hotels and motels, are framed as spaces of 'cramping' and 'choking' that, instead of reducing detention-like conditions, often exacerbate existing health concerns through their carceral adaptability (Pugliese, 2009; Tazzioli, 2021). Claire Loughnan (2022: 1) refers to these spaces as 'quasi-carceral sites that sit uneasily along a continuum of care and control' (see also Altin and Minca, 2017). Further, as Irit Katz (2022: 8)

notes: ‘Scholars indeed consider hotels to be directly linked to camps and other carceral facilities, in which care and custody go hand in hand as part of efforts of state powers to discipline through space.’ However, to date, no publicly available comprehensive documentation of Australia’s use of hotel APODs exists – their location, the number of detainees held and other information remains difficult to trace and at times purposefully obfuscated by government agencies. While hidden in this way, the choice to use hotels as detention facilities situates these spaces within a highly localized context; as Diana Martin and colleagues’ analysis of camp studies has shown, there are ‘meaningful and complex relationships between the city and the camp’ (Martin et al, 2020: 746). It is the mundane and covert nature of hotel detention, coupled with minimal independent oversight, this chapter argues, that further contributes to practices and outcomes of non-care for detainees and has created a system of hidden camps. Yet their situatedness within everyday urban and suburban landscapes also leads them to become highly contested spaces, both from within and without.

‘Alternative places of detention’

Introduced in 1992, the use of mandatory immigration detention in Australia now spans three decades – Australian law requires the detention of all non-citizens who are in Australia without a valid visa (Nethery, 2021). Australia’s mandatory detention policies and practices have drawn considerable attention and rebuke, both nationally and internationally, particularly following the removal of the 273-day time limit on detention in 1994, beginning the practice of indefinite detention that continues to this day (Taylor, 2006; Dehm et al, 2021). Since that time, Australia has relied upon a network of both onshore and offshore detention sites, including on the Australian offshore territory of Christmas Island, as well as in the independent nations of Nauru and Papua New Guinea (Boochani and Tofighian, 2018; Morris, 2022).

Less known, however, has been the use of APODs by the Australian government. Prior to 2001, the Migration Act 1958 allowed the immigration minister to declare *any place* a place of detention and was ‘generally used to facilitate the provision of certain services outside immigration detention centres’ (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2004). This meant that places such as motels, schools or hospitals could be declared as places of detention. In August 2001, the first ‘Residential Housing Project’ (RHP) was announced by the immigration minister, located close to the former Woomera Immigration Detention Centre (IDC), at the time known for hunger strikes and breakouts. Thus began the first publicly documented use of ‘alternative detention arrangements’, primarily focused on removing women and their children, as well as unaccompanied minors, from detention

centre facilities (Every et al, 2013). It should also be noted that, prior to this announcement, a parliamentary inquiry into detention camps such as Woomera was launched in 2000, leading to the publication of a report titled ‘Not the Hilton’ (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2000), drawing connections to Australia’s supposed hospitality to unwelcome asylum seekers. As Suvendrini Perera (2002: 7) reflects in her essay ‘What is a camp?’:

The hotel/prison/asylum allusions play on the distinctions between forced and voluntary sojourns, recalling the [former Australian] Immigration Minister [Philip] Ruddock’s favourite rejoinder to critics of mandatory detention: that asylum seekers are not being forcibly confined – they are free anytime to *go back to where they came from* [emphasis in original].

In December 2002, the ‘Migration Series Instruction (MSI) 371 on Alternative Places of Detention’ was issued by the Australian government, with the specific purpose of facilitating earlier interventions for the transfer of women and children to the RHP facilities and elsewhere (Taylor, 2006). The use of home-based detention, and other sites including motels, schools and hospitals, also required members of the community to be designated as persons authorized to detain children and their families, such as foster carers and school principals, classified as ‘directed persons’ (AHRC, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Mitchell, 2009).

Several definitions of APODs can now be found within Australian federal government policy, as well as in reports from human rights organizations. A useful definition drawn from the AHRC (2023) – one of only two official detention inspectorates in Australia, alongside the Commonwealth Ombudsman (see Fleay, 2015; Gleeson, 2019) – acknowledges the broad array of facilities that may be incorporated:

In addition to established immigration detention centres, the Migration Act also provides for the Minister to approve (in writing) other places being used as detention facilities. These Alternative Places of Detention (APODs) are intended to be used for people who have particular needs that cannot be met within existing detention centres, and may include hospitals, aged care facilities, or mental health facilities.

The implementation of MSI 371, following the trial of home-based detention, therefore opened the door to the more sustained use of hotels as detention facilities.

The first *known* use of a hotel APOD was to accommodate a pregnant woman detained at the former Baxter IDC in 2003. Recognizing that sufficient care could not be provided at the remotely located IDC, the

woman was transferred to a suburban motel in the city of Adelaide before later giving birth at the Adelaide Women and Children's Hospital (which was also designated as an APOD during this time; see [Elletson, 2005](#)). The motel used for her detention, the Arkaba Court Motel, continued in its 'normal' role, with motel guests staying in surrounding rooms, who were unaware of the woman's presence until they noticed security guarding her room ([Jackson, 2006](#)). The Arkaba Court Motel would come to further attention in 2005, with the detention of Ali Beyazkilinc, also transferred from Baxter IDC, supposedly to provide access to necessary mental health care ([Pugliese, 2009](#)). As Joseph [Pugliese \(2009: 152, 154, 155\)](#) notes in his analysis of the Arkaba Court Motel, seemingly banal suburban architecture can easily be 'transmuted' into 'prison-like structures' by immigration authorities, a form of 'civil penalty'. Since this time, hotels and other APOD facilities have been used across Australia, including in former military barracks, among other types of non-purpose-built facilities (see [Monfries, 2011](#); [Curtis and Mee, 2012](#); [Lobo, 2021](#); [Mares and Ziersch, 2024](#)).

The hotel as hidden camp

In the years following the Arkaba Court case, there was little documented or publicly known use of APODs by the Australian federal government, at least until 2018. This is not to suggest, however, that APODs were not in use, given their largely hidden nature and the obfuscated documentation of their existence, as official government statistics on APOD detainee numbers – peaking above 3,000 persons in 2013 – show during this time. Although efforts have been made to identify and map all known APOD sites and facilities through government policy and media analysis (see [Figures 10.1 and 10.2](#)), Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and the use of independent detention inspectorate reports, there are undoubtedly many other APOD sites that have not been identified since their inception in 2002 (see [Doherty, 2022](#); [Kaldor Centre, 2022](#)). It is also difficult to quantify exactly how many people have been detained within APODs during this time, and more specifically, how many per *type* of APOD facility (hotels, former military barracks, private housing, and so on). This lack of knowledge to date was further conceded by the AHRC in its report on the use of hotel APODs in June 2023 ([AHRC, 2023](#)). While the Australian government has publicly reported on *overall* numbers of detainees within APODs across the country only since 2013, and since July 2020 has provided a breakdown of numbers to the level of state and territory, it has not done so at the level of individual facility or by APOD facility *type* (that is, hotel, hospital, care home).

FOI requests to understand the scope of APOD use have been returned with heavily redacted responses. In one example, a response to a request made in November 2020 listed 49 sites that had been designated as APODs

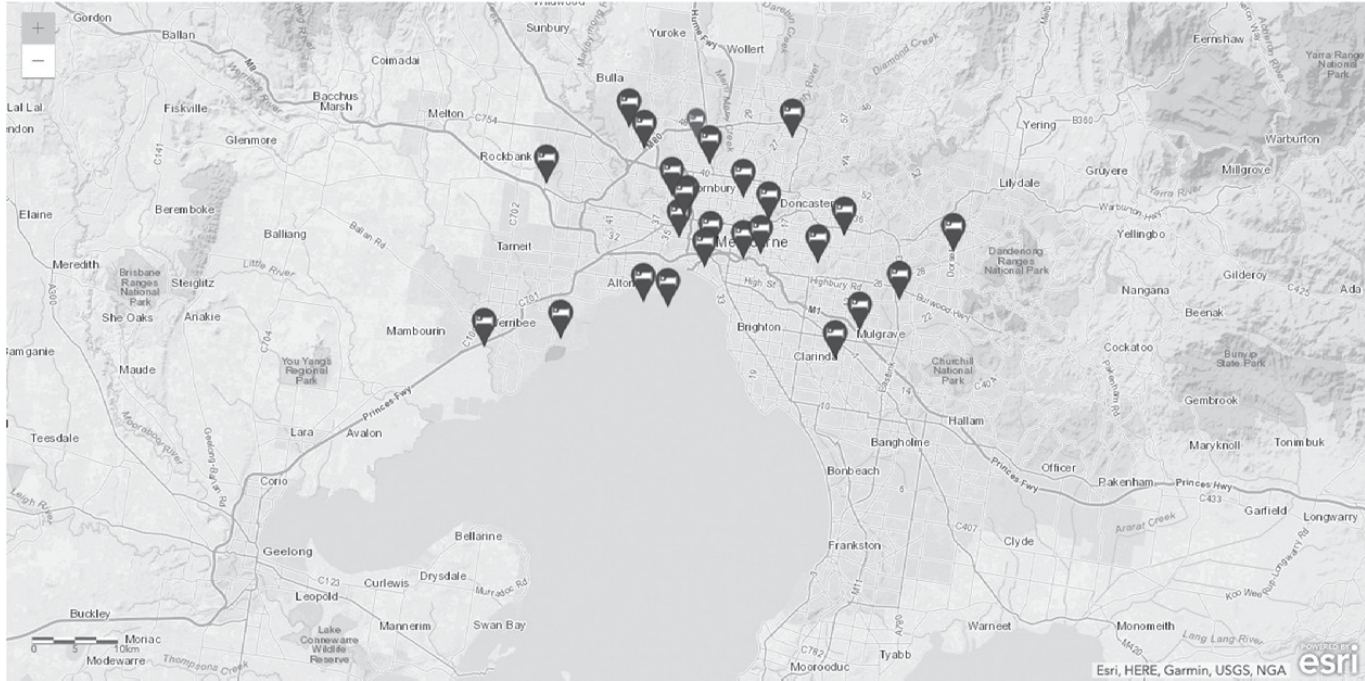
Figure 10.1: Map of all known hotel APOD sites across Australia between 2002 and 2022, showing details of an individual hotel detention site



Notes: Only 34 hotels were able to be identified, all of which were no longer in use as APOD facilities. This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: Kaldor Centre, 2022

Figure 10.2: Detail of the interactive map, showing all known sites in the metropolitan region of Melbourne, capital city of the state of Victoria



Note: This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: Kaldor Centre, 2022

with all information regarding location removed ([Department of Home Affairs, 2020](#)). The often hidden and obfuscated use of APODs, specifically hotels, was more recently demonstrated by a question posed to the Senate Estimates Inquiry² by a senator from the Green Party in March 2021. The request sought ‘a breakdown on the total number of alternative places of detention (APODs) in Australia at all times since 2018’, as well as a request for a distinction of hotel facilities from other types to be made as well as the capacity of these specific sites. The response provided a staggering figure that points directly to the mostly still unknown frequency of use and diversity of location of APODs: ‘From 1 January 2018 to 31 January 2021, there were 170 Alternative Places of Detention (APODs) used in Australia at any time ... As at 31 January 2021, 56 APODs were classified as hotel-type APODs’ ([Department of Home Affairs, 2021b](#)). The 56 separate hotels identified between 2018 and 2021 were broken down by state and territory, with most recorded as detaining fewer than five persons at their maximum capacity, highlighting the use of individual rooms or small buildings that are unlikely to gain public awareness. A subsequent joint report by the [Commonwealth Ombudsman and AHRC \(2022\)](#) showed that this figure had expanded to 77 designated hotel APOD facilities, with seven in use in mid-2022. It is important to note, then, that it is also difficult to determine the number of *designated* hotel facilities that have actively held persons in detention.

The detention of greater numbers of individual persons in hotels, particularly since 2018, reflects a shift in practice regarding the use of APODs by the Australian government, detaining mostly individual men (and some women) rather than families or unaccompanied minors, although still framed as being for purposes of supposed ‘care’, as this chapter will now turn to examine.

‘Torture hotels’: cramped spaces and medical (non-)care

Since their inception, the Australian government has maintained that APODs, particularly hotels, are intended as short-term transit accommodation, typically as a transfer point to community detention, ‘airport turnarounds’ or removal. The AHRC, however, has consistently noted that detention within APODs has been anything but ‘short term’. Since at least 2010 ([AHRC, 2010](#)), but particularly since 2018, some people have been detained in hotel rooms for periods *exceeding two years*. Further, the AHRC and Commonwealth Ombudsman, alongside unconfirmed and non-publicized visits by the Red Cross, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Amnesty International, have noted the unsuitability of hotel and other APOD facilities for the use of detention: ‘In general, the Commission considers that hotels are not appropriate places of detention, given their lack

of dedicated facilities and restrictions on access to open space. Accordingly, hotels should only be used as APODs in exceptional circumstances and for very short periods of time' (AHRC, 2019: 49). Despite the findings and recommendations of official detention inspectorates and human rights organizations for more than a decade, the use of hotel spaces to detain asylum seekers and refugees has not only continued but also expanded. Indeed, it is the very adaptability of the hotel, from a space of accommodation and respite to one of incarceration, as Robert Davidson (2018) has noted in his historical examination of hotels, that has perhaps appealed to the Australian government in its use of administrative (but demonstrably punitive) mandatory and indefinite detention (see also Fregonese and Ramadan, 2015; Minca and Ong, 2016). Rather than a reprieve from purpose-built detention facilities, as initially proposed in response to concerns over families and children in detention, and inability to provide suitable physical and mental health care, hotels are often *more* restrictive and carceral in nature. As Sara Dehm et al (2021: 66; see also AHRC, 2019: 48) note, 'people detained in APODs and hotel detention may be effectively confined to their rooms for most of the day, with no access to cooking facilities or recreational areas'.

In 2010, the AHRC inspected the use of the Asti Motel, situated in the city of Darwin, in the Northern Territory, then referred to as 'Australia's capital of detention' due to the high number of detention facilities across the city (Coddington, 2017). The inspectorate declared that the motel, at the time used for the detention of families and unaccompanied minors, was 'the most restrictive facility in Darwin in terms of the amount of open space. Notably, this low-security facility was considered more restrictive in terms of open space than the high-security Northern Immigration Detention Centre' (AHRC, 2010: 84, note 53). Inspections by the Ombudsman and the AHRC have repeatedly noted the lack of access to outside space for fresh air and recreation, suitable medical facilities or care and other services provided within dedicated detention facilities, as well as the practice of confinement to individual rooms for up to 23 hours per day under the constant watch of private security guards (AHRC, 2019; Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2020).

Cramping and choking of hotel detainees

As Prue Elletson (2005) and others have previously noted, the use of APODs, typically located within urban areas of major cities, was initially connected to the need for care and medical services that could not be provided within remote detention centres, both onshore and offshore. Access to the provision of care while held in an APOD, however, is highly contingent, and health and wellbeing issues of detainees transferred from detention facilities may be further compounded or exacerbated by the cramped and isolated conditions of hotels, motels and other APOD sites. A slight irony is that one justification

for the more recent use of hotel APODs has been for ‘relieving overcrowding in other immigration detention facilities’ (AHRC, 2023: 10).

Hotel APODs can therefore be framed as specific spaces of ‘cramping’ and ‘choking’ for those detained within. As William Walters and Barbara Lüthi (2016: 359) have argued, ‘[c]ramped space registers degrees of deprivation, constriction, and obstruction’, and ‘discomfort’ is central to understandings of such spaces. Martina Tazzioli (2021) has expanded on this initial discussion of cramped space to consider the biopolitical nature of such a practice of cramping and choking – the ability of authorities to create such discomfort without killing: ‘Indeed, being choked might mean also being short of breath without necessarily dying: illegalized migrants often find themselves entrapped in cramped spaces – such as crowded detention centers, in trucks or in vessels’, being left ‘exhausted and debilitated both physically and psychologically’ (Tazzioli, 2021: 4, 9). Cramping and choking – the inability to move freely or to breathe – has been central to descriptions of hotel APODs, particularly since their use for larger cohorts of detainees, starting with the Asti Hotel complex in 2010 (174 people at its peak) and continuing through to the Park Hotel in Melbourne in 2020, which has been referred to as a ‘prison’ and ‘torture hotel’ (Marsh, 2021) by detainees and advocates: ‘During its visit the Commission had significant concerns about the high number of people detained at the Asti – including more than 80 young children and unaccompanied teenagers – in a very *cramped* environment with little room to move’ (AHRC, 2010: 8; emphasis added). Those held in hotels have therefore been subjected to cramped (typically shared) rooms, hallways and common areas, at times with windows drilled closed, and repeatedly denied access to open space for fresh air and recreation. Everyday practices of non-care were also documented by Medevac transferees within the hotels, including being served rotten food (Gillespie and Lucente, 2021), ambulances being turned away or denied access to the buildings by private security guards (Doherty, 2021b) and nurses being unavailable after 4 pm each day (Damjanovic, 2021).

Exacerbating health concerns within detention

While media reporting and statements from detainees have demonstrated the severe effects of confinement in rooms never intended for detention, other studies have also found that APODs have significant impacts on the health and wellbeing of both adults and children, noting that these facilities deserved to be singled out for their punitive and carceral nature: ‘APODs had a devastating impact on children’s mental health and development, particularly for those detained for prolonged periods and those who had significant prior trauma’ (Essex and Govintharajah, 2017: 527). A study by Kyli Hedrick and others (2020) concerned with self-harm within detention

facilities also found APODs to be exceptional in their levels of reported incidents. In the first reported study of self-harm incidents by immigration facility *type*, it was found that APODs were second only to purpose-built Immigration Transit Accommodation (ITA) centres in their frequency of incidents (Hedrick et al, 2020: 5). The study concluded that the nature of APOD facilities – specifically hotels – was directly connected to the high rates of self-harm.

Detainees and detention inspectorates have noted the frequent lack of sufficient medical and mental health services available within hotel APODs, failing to meet even the very low standards implemented within purpose-built detention facilities. This has included the practice of ‘mismedication’ reported by detainees, though not unique to hotels, as former detainee Behrouz Boochani discusses in his examination of offshore detention on Manus Island (Boochani and Tofighian, 2018). Mardin Arvin, a detainee on Christmas and Manus Islands, transferred to the Australian mainland for medical care and subsequently detained in several hotels across Melbourne, noted the common occurrence of mismedication throughout almost a decade of detention, coupled with the lengthy processes and time involved in requesting to see a doctor from within a hotel. Eventually, some detainees chose refusal of (mis)medication as a form of resistance:

Refusing their ‘health care’ was one way I could refuse their system. It was a way for me to also refuse the government’s pretence of care for our health, and to align my life with the truth – that imprisoning asylum seekers is itself an attack on our well-being ... Hotel detention is causing medical harm. (Arvin, 2021)

Jonathan Inda (2022: 184) frames the use of mismedication within detention facilities as a ‘necropolitics of uncare – defined as a lethal politics of not caring about nor caring for’, created through a ‘dearth or absence of both affective and practical care’ (see also Loughnan, 2022). Those transferred to APOD sites, both prior to and under the short-lived ‘Medevac provision’ for necessary medical care, as this chapter now turns to discuss, had already been exposed to such practices of non-care on offshore detention sites, including Christmas and Manus Island, for up to seven years (Boochani and Tofighian, 2018).

‘Medevac’ hotels: continuing denial of care in detention

In February 2019, the Migration Act 1958 was amended through the Migration Amendment (Urgent Medical Treatment) Bill, referred to simply as the ‘Medevac Bill’ or provision. The Bill passed in Australia’s Senate,

allowing the transfer of some detainees held on the islands of Manus and Nauru for medical care that could not be provided within those offshore detention facilities or in the surrounding communities (though still first requiring the recommendation of two independent doctors through the government-contracted International Medical and Health Services; Davidson, 2019; Reilly, 2019). This was a short-lived provision, passed in February and coming into effect in March 2019, with the first transferees arriving soon after. The legislation was repealed in December of that year, however, following unsubstantiated arguments by the government that the provision was a security concern, allowing refugees to supposedly ‘game’ the system in being transferred to mainland Australia (Walton, 2019; Gillespie, 2023). During this time, 192 refugees and asylum seekers from Nauru and Manus Island were transferred for emergency medical treatment under the provision (Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2022).

By the close of 2019, 110 of those transferred under the Medevac provision, mostly individual men, were detained within hotels that were newly designated as APODs – rather than in existing dedicated detention centres. A small number of women were also transferred and detained in hotels, while some transfers prior to Medevac had also relied upon the use of hotel detention (Smee et al, 2019; Vasefi, 2019). It was not clearly stated why hotels were chosen to be used instead of dedicated detention facilities for Medevac transferees. However, APODs are classified by the government as ‘a temporary solution to meet a critical need, such as for medical treatment ... or where no other immigration detention facilities are available’ (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2009: 19–20).

Unique to this specific moment in the use of hotel APODs was the seemingly unprecedented number of individual men detained. The vast majority were initially held in two hotels: the Kangaroo Point Central Hotel in Brisbane (Queensland), and the Mantra Bell Preston Hotel in Melbourne (Victoria), while other smaller hotels were also leased for detention in both cities, although their use remained largely unreported (see Harris, 2019; Eddie and Hall, 2020). Referring to the use of one particular smaller motel during this time that had evaded media and community attention, the Best Western in the Melbourne suburb of Fawkner, a solicitor and executive director of a free legal service noted in an interview in 2021 that it was typical ‘to find out about the existence of another [APOD] site ... [only] when someone calls us for legal assistance from that place’ (Eddie, 2021; see also Department of Home Affairs, 2021a).

The Mantra Bell Preston – a former hospital converted to a large-scale high-rise hotel in 1999 – continued to be used for hotel patrons and long-stay students and business professionals, with one floor designated for the Medevac detainees: at its peak, 77 men were held there (Department of Home Affairs, 2021b). During this time, detainees were able to be seen

from the street below, although verbal communication was difficult due to windows only opening slightly and being several storeys above the street (Loughnan, 2020). This visibility did, however, allow the use of hand-written signs and body language to communicate to the media and community, while the street outside became the site of numerous solidarity protests by refugee advocates and community members following media reports that led to widespread awareness of their detention (Vogl et al, 2021; Popovski and Young, 2023).

The Kangaroo Point Central hotel was unique not only for the scale of detention – initially taking over one section of the hotel, before all existing patrons (including long-stay residents) were removed to allow the entire building to be used for detention – but also for the proximity and ease of communication with the general public on the street outside the low-rise hotel complex (Ryan, 2020; Ubayasari, 2021). Those detained – 117 mostly men at its peak in April 2020 (Department Home Affairs, 2021b) – were granted access to an outdoor patio, one floor up, where it was possible to maintain verbal communication with community advocates, family members, the media and others. As with the Mantra Hotel, this also became a site of protest by the community, though protests in Brisbane were more sustained, in part due to the COVID-19-related lockdown measures implemented in Melbourne that saw protestors fined for leaving their homes for ‘non-essential purposes’ (Ubayasari, 2021; Vogl et al, 2021). Overall, it was the ability to be seen and communicate with the public, through their visibility from the street, as well as the use of social and mainstream media, that allowed detainees to advocate for better care and eventual release from the typically unknown and hidden hotel detention facilities.

The local scale of hotel detention

It is important to note that all of the hotels that were known to detain Medevac transferees between late 2019 and mid-2022 were situated within inner-city local government areas (LGAs) often with more progressive leadership and constituencies, that also classified themselves as ‘Refugee Welcome Zones’ (RWZs). As the City of Darebin, in which the Mantra Hotel is located, notes on its council webpage: ‘A Refugee Welcome Zone is a Local Government Area which has made a commitment in spirit to welcoming refugees into the community, upholding the human rights of refugees, demonstrating compassion for refugees and enhancing cultural and religious diversity in community’ (Darebin City Council, 2022). Darebin Council stated on its webpage that it supported the release of the Medevac detainees, as well as its backing of the ‘Time for a Home’ campaign that calls ‘on the Federal Government to release all remaining refugees in detention and commit to a pathway for their resettlement’ (Darebin City Council,

2022). Other LGAs, such as City of Merri-Bek (in which the Best Western Motel is situated), and the City of Melbourne (where the former Park Hotel is situated), both in the state of Victoria, and the City of Brisbane (where the former Kangaroo Point Central Hotel is situated), in the state of Queensland, are also signatories to the RWZ initiative.

Unlike the sanctuary city policies particularly seen across North America and the UK (Bagelman and Kovalchuk, 2019; Darling and Bauder, 2019) that seek to challenge national or federal-level immigration policy regarding the detention and deportation of asylum seekers at a distinctly local level, RWZs involve local governments committing to supporting the human rights of refugees who have been officially recognized and settled within local communities, excluding those in detention or with unresolved settlement status (RCOA, nd). However, some members within the local government authorities, including local mayors, demonstrated their support for protestors and other advocacy efforts, including some councillors attending rallies and even being arrested. They also acknowledged that they were initially unaware that the Australian Border Force had set up immigration detention in hotels within their local jurisdiction during the transfer period for Medevac, having not been notified that such practices were occurring. Such a response marked a change in recognition of the responsibilities of being an RWZ.

Councillors from Darebin and Merri-Bek further sought clarification of urban planning rules at the local and state level regarding the definition of hotel accommodation, and whether the hotels had breached their planning permits (Eddie, 2020; Eddie and Hall, 2020). The response to these enquiries from the Minister for Planning in Victoria made it clear, however, that this kind of use of hotels to detain refugees met the established definitions of ‘accommodation’ in this context. Similar challenges to the UK planning system have also been seen surrounding the use of hotels and conversion of military barracks to accommodate asylum seekers (Casciani, 2022).

As Sheryl-Ann Simpson and her co-authors (2020: 130) have argued, the relationship between urban planning at the local level and penal systems, and the ways in which planning is ‘implicated in the social and racial inequities that characterize policing and imprisonment’, have yet to receive sufficient attention. Such contradictions between federal and local government policy and standpoints regarding the establishment of APODs within supposed welcome zones for refugees demonstrate the highly localized situation of federally operated detention. The proximity of hotels to large urban populations, often in progressive constituencies, has provided a unique context in contrast to purpose-built detention facilities, which are often located at significant distance from major urban areas in Australia and have relied upon distance and travel expenses to minimize independent oversight and community or legal advocacy efforts (Fleay and Briskman, 2013). The

situatedness of these camps within local communities therefore afforded opportunities for solidarity and advocacy from residents, local government, non-governmental organizations and the legal sphere, while at the same time those detained indefinitely faced conditions of torture within supposed ‘zones of welcome’ (Sidhu and Rossi-Sackey, 2022).

As Martin et al (2020: 746) note in their examination of camps, ‘contemporary cities become new borderscapes where both makeshift and institutional camps are created’, demonstrating the complex relationships that form between cities and camps. Henrik Lebuhn’s (2013: 39) discussion of the embedding of national border politics and enforcement in the everyday landscape of cities at the subnational scale also notes how ‘local institutions are being absorbed into the border regime in order to extend it to the urban scale’. Importantly, as scholars such as Vanessa Massaro and Geoff Boyce (2021) note, carceral spaces now often extend beyond the formal institutional sites of the prison and the detention centre, creating ‘everyday carceralities’ at the local scale (Cassidy, 2019: 48), such as within inner-city and suburban hotels.

The arrival of COVID-19 in hotel detention

The final transfers to the Australian mainland in late 2019 under the Medevac provision also coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon after, detainees within hotel APODs as well as dedicated detention facilities raised concerns about the ineffective or non-existent measures to prevent COVID-19 entering the hotel buildings. They noted the impossibility of social distancing, given the use of shared rooms, cramped hallways and shared common spaces, alongside the inability to open windows within rooms. As a detainee at the Kangaroo Point Hotel reported:

[T]he doctors, they are saying ‘you need to have three or four metres from each other’, we don’t have one centimetre from each other. We are just sitting with each other in the dining room or on the balcony when people are smoking, that’s the only place we have for fresh air. (Blakkarly, 2020)

Following transfers under Medevac in mid- to late 2019, those detained within hotels were only able to access outdoor exercise space through organized day trips to nearby detention centres (the Brisbane and Melbourne ITA facilities), requiring lengthy transfers due to security measures (Ryan, 2020). This singular avenue of access to outdoor space and recreation was soon after removed in March 2020 due to concerns about COVID-19 transmission within and between detention facilities, confining exercise to indoor gyms at the hotels (AHRC, 2021).

On 19 March 2020, reports that a private security guard working at the Mantra had tested positive began to circulate, soon followed by similar reports at Kangaroo Point (Baker, 2020). Meanwhile, detainees at the Villawood IDC in the western suburbs of Sydney – Australia’s largest-capacity IDC – staged a rooftop protest, visible to surrounding residential housing, though quickly ended by security guards, and also wrote an open letter to the prime minister, requesting their release on 23 March: ‘It is only a matter of time before it will breach our closed environment ... We are sitting ducks for COVID-19 and are extremely exposed to becoming severely ill, with the possibility of death’ (Knowles and Story, 2020). A further complaint was lodged with the Commonwealth Ombudsman, the other official detention inspectorate alongside the AHRC, by 13 detainees across several detention facilities on 7 May 2020, filed by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, noting that in some instances five people were sharing one room, with up to 12 men sharing one shower and toilet (Farhart, 2020).

While successful efforts to decarcerate detention facilities in Canada and other countries were seen following the onset of the pandemic (Motluk, 2022), the Australian government resisted such calls from detainees, advocacy groups and medical professionals, despite having listed ‘people in detention facilities’ as being within the highest risk category for contracting COVID-19 on its official Department of Health website (RCOA, 2020). In contrast to other countries releasing detainees, the AHRC noted in its June 2021 report regarding COVID-19 within immigration detention facilities that the detainee population had actually *increased* across Australia, from 1,373 persons in March 2020 to 1,527 in February 2021 (AHRC, 2021).

Perhaps through sheer luck, given repeated warnings that basic COVID-19 protocols had not been implemented within cramped detention facilities, including APODs, the first notable outbreak did not occur until October 2021 at the Park Hotel in Melbourne (where detainees previously held at the Mantra Hotel had been transferred). The hotel was referred to as a ‘COVID incubator’, and detainees protested their continued confinement as they awaited (often delayed) testing following the initial positive cases. Vaccination rates also lagged significantly behind the national average in detention facilities across Australia and was notably lower again within APODs, at just 13 per cent, compared to the national average of 38.4 per cent fully vaccinated by September 2021 (Doherty, 2021a). Further concerns arose given that those positive cases who were quarantining were kept just one floor below, with air-conditioned air circulating between the floors, and windows unable to be opened. Consequently, by 22 October, nearly one third of detainees at the Park Hotel had tested positive as COVID-19 spread rapidly throughout the hotel.

Carceral churn: denying care through forced (im)mobility

Since their inception, APOD facilities, beyond their own carceral-like operation, have maintained a highly interconnected function with IDCs and ITAs situated across the Australian mainland, as well as offshore facilities. Those transferred to the mainland, and to hotels that were supposedly less detention-like in their settings, found that such non-care continued, often to the point where detainees requested return to their prior offshore locations. While the media and political focus following the implementation of hotels as sites of detention for Medevac transferees typically gave no recognition of the almost two decades of prior APOD use by the Australian government, a similar lack of connection was made between hotel APODs and the purpose-built detention facilities that operate in conjunction with each other.

The inextricable connection between hotels and detention centres has been demonstrated through punitive forms of (im)mobility imposed upon detainees. As Michelle Peterie (2020, 2021) has noted, the onshore detention landscape in Australia is marked by the frequent and high number of forced relocations of detainees – or ‘churn’ – between detention centres (see also Gill, 2009). This also extended to the forcible removal of detainees from hotels, not only to nearby facilities but through unannounced relocations between rooms and floors, and also through transfers to detention centres. These transfers were at times claimed by detainees to be used as punishment for individuals protesting their ongoing detention within the hotels and speaking out in the media (Gregoire, 2020). Following transfers, detainees were often also placed in isolation cells within the detention centres, justified as a quarantine measure under COVID-19 requirements, further exacerbating often existing physical and mental health conditions.

The two largest and most prominent hotels used for Medevac transfers saw an end to their role as APODs over the course of 2020–21, though with differing outcomes. In late December 2020, following the expiry of the contract with the Department of Home Affairs, the approximately 60 remaining detainees at the Mantra Hotel were transferred to the Park Hotel in the inner-city suburb of Carlton, close to the Central Business District of Melbourne (Davey, 2022). Notably, the Park Hotel (at the time known as the Rydges Hotel) had only recently ended its use as a quarantine facility for returning Australian citizens during the pandemic. It had achieved notoriety due to being linked with one of the largest outbreaks of COVID-19 into the community from a state government-run quarantine hotel, sparking the ‘second wave’ of COVID infections in Melbourne and leading to widespread lockdowns across the metropolis (followed by the sale of the hotel and later name change in 2020; Henriques-Gomes, 2020).

Detainees and advocates were quick to note the contradiction of the recognized unsuitability of hotels as non-purpose-built quarantine facilities for Australian citizens and residents, coupled with subcontracted private security and a lack of medical facilities on site, that were apparently safe for vulnerable Medevac transferees. The men were transferred under police escort, having not been told where they were being transferred, or why. Upon arriving at the Park Hotel, the detainees quickly realized that the conditions were worse than at the Mantra, with windows that were unable to be opened at all: ‘I can’t breathe. The living conditions is not better than the Mantra prison. They lied to us. We cannot wave at each other like before. In front of most of the windows there is a wall. It makes us uncomfortable’ (hotel detainee ‘Moz’, Twitter, 17 December 2020). In Brisbane, while some detainees had already been released into community detention on 16 April 2021, those remaining in the Kangaroo Point Central were forcibly removed and transferred by minibus to the nearby Brisbane ITA facility (Boseley, 2021). This in part followed a dispute with the hotel’s owners, who had subleased the premises, which had subsequently been leased by the Australian Border Force before again being subcontracted to the private security company Serco, which operated all detention facilities run by the Australian government (Dehm et al, 2021).

Throughout 2021 and early 2022, a slow release of Medevac detainees occurred from the Park Hotel as well as several ITAs. While this ended nine years of detention for some, those released into the community still officially remained on short-term ‘bridging visas’, under community detention orders. Upon release, many found themselves temporarily housed in hotels and motels provided by the government, though they were now free to come and go. For many, severe health conditions following almost a decade of detention and neglect – including no access to outside air or light since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – meant that they were too unwell to savour their newfound (and highly contingent) freedom (Courty, 2022).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the use of APODs to detain individuals, unaccompanied minors and families since 2002 in Australia demonstrates the inextricable connections between the hidden practice of hotel detention and (non-)care. Initially proposed as a measure to remove children and vulnerable adults from detention facilities and so that they could access care, and later used for medical transfers from offshore detention – framed as ‘short-term’ or ‘transit’ accommodation by the Australian government – the use of hotels has proven to be a long-term and durable form of detention that has created significant harm through cramping and choking, often hidden within the urban fabric of cities and local communities. Throughout this time, hotels

have remained both hidden in plain sight within local communities and highly interconnected within the broader detention landscape across Australia and in offshore locations. In February 2024, a federal court decision – in response to a legal challenge to the designation and use of APODs for detention under the Migration Act by a former detainee of the Mantra and Park Hotels – upheld a previous ruling made in 2023 that hotel detention was lawful, ensuring their continued use by the Australian government (Ore, 2024).

Hotels and other non-purpose-built facilities used to incarcerate – what Roberta Altin and Claudio Minca (2017) have referred to as ‘quasi-carceral sites’ – therefore form an integral part of the wider detention landscape, locally, nationally and globally (Burridge, 2023; Burridge and Darling, 2024). The hidden nature of this form of camp, this chapter has shown, is a key contributor to ongoing practices of non-care within immigration detention in Australia. The difficulty of determining the location and functioning of hotel sites, coupled with their mundane appearance and lack of public awareness, has ensured that those detained within remain both out of sight and with minimal oversight from inspectorate bodies.

The hotel as camp is not unique, however, to Australia. Both Canada and the United States have used hotels as closed detention facilities (Pratt, 2005; Davidson, 2018). The United Kingdom also relies heavily on hotels; however, these are ‘open’ facilities, drawn upon to provide accommodation to those awaiting a decision on their asylum appeal or their deportation (Gibson, 2003; Darling and Burridge, 2025), while similar practices can be seen across the European Union (Novak, 2019). Hotels therefore form part of a broader carceral and detention landscape, employed by governments across the globe, in efforts to manage and constrain mobility and that continue practices of non-care.

Notes

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- ² ‘Senate estimates hearings, also known as estimates committees or simply “estimates”, allow senators to scrutinize – closely examine – how the executive government is spending taxpayers’ money’ (<https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/how-parliament-works/parliament-at-work/senate-estimates/>).

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PART III

Camps as Economic Resources

How Do Camps Affect Cities? The Political Economy of Refugee Camps and Arua, Uganda

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The fact is that urban refugees exist.

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Introduction

Since 2009, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas was published, urban refugees have been an increasing part of the global agenda on refugee responses. The 2009 urban refugee policy was bolstered by [UNHCR's 2014 'Policy on alternatives to camps'](#), which acknowledges that in many cases camps are not the best environment for refugees and further reinforces refugees' right to freedom of movement. The emphasis on refugees in urban areas has arguably only grown since the 2015–16 influx of Syrians into neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, where no formal refugee camps were established, and Jordan, where an estimated 85 per cent of the country's refugees live outside of camps ([Global System for Mobile Communications Association \[GSMA\], 2018](#)).

At the same time that urban refugees are being increasingly recognized, there is a startling lack of research on the relationship between the towns and cities where refugees reside and the settlements and camps that are often nearby (the most significant exception to this is the fascinating but small body of work examining refugee camps that have been subsumed, though not always integrated, into cities, thereby arguably becoming urban environments (for example [Sanyal, 2012](#); [Dalal, 2022](#)). However, much of

camp studies focuses on refugee camps as largely contained sites – of political space (for example Ramadan, 2013), of control and surveillance (for example Fashtangi, 2020) and even of ‘feeling and sensibilities’ (Brankamp, 2022). A focus on the urbanization of refugee camps, including the creation of city-camps (Agier, 2002), highlights the role that refugees themselves have in the socio-economy and spatiality of camps (for example Sanyal, 2010; Martin, 2015; Oesch, 2017), even extending to recognition of refugees as ‘urban actors’ (Dalal et al, 2018). However, even in such discussions, the examination of camps within larger ecosystems and geographical spheres is limited, and camp-based refugees are rarely analysed in relation to their movement into (other) urban spaces. This corresponds to a broader gap in research on urban refugees, particularly those outside of capital cities. Notably, refugee camps and settlements are often on the peripheries of host countries, far from capitals and often in more marginalized areas. Thus, the urban areas where refugees live may often be in smaller towns and lesser-known cities, as this chapter explores. Yet the numbers of displaced people in these so-called ‘secondary cities’ are often not matched by recognition, assistance or funding. Secondary cities and towns may lack strong ties to central governments and ministries compared to capital cities (Ammann et al, 2021), and international financing mechanisms for displaced people can overlook municipal needs. This, in turn, can impede municipalities’ ability to access funding to address needs arising from hosting refugees, or for relevant municipal issues to be shared nationally or internationally.

While academic research traditionally focuses on refugees in either camp or urban settings, this chapter highlights how the existence of refugee camps affects neighbouring cities, particularly when refugees leave camps for cities or engage in circular migration between camps and cities. In so doing, this chapter contributes to camp studies through examining camps and cities as distinct yet connected spaces, linked both by the refugees moving between them and – critically – policies, practices and events in each that influence the other in often overlooked ways. It examines the interplay between camp and city and, in particular, the experiences of urban refugees officially registered in settlements. I take a political economy approach to the impact of forced migration on cities, examining the flow (or lack thereof) of national and international funding to the cities that now host many of the world’s refugees – as well as the dwindling resources of many longstanding refugee settlements. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s discussion of the relevance of populations to political economy, which is a distinct but related element of his theorization of biopower and governmentality, I explore, in particular, the impact of refugees’ status as *non-residents* in many urban areas and their lack of ‘statistical existence’ in cities in relation to government control. Of central importance are the unacknowledged settlement–city refugee inflows and the existence of ongoing city–settlement

circular migration. In this way, migration to both settlements and cities operates with a similar push/pull logic: refugees leave settlements to pursue work as well as to get other needs met but often are unable to generate enough income to live sustainably without the monthly food rations afforded to those in settlements. Circular migration thus results in part from the limited funding and assistance for refugees in both urban areas *and* settlements. This is representative of a troubling decline in aid for long-term refugee populations, manifest globally (Financial Tracking Service Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [FTS OCHA], 2022). It also reflects tensions within the national context of Uganda, in which the government only legally recognizes refugees living in settlements and in the capital, Kampala, rendering those in other urban areas ‘voluntary migrants’ without recourse to international aid.

This chapter explores these issues through a case study of Arua, an important secondary city in Uganda’s West Nile region, close to both the South Sudanese and Congolese borders. Situated between refugee camps, Arua City has tripled in size due to urban refugees, with a quarter of the over 1 million South Sudanese refugees in Uganda now in Arua District. Findings are based on field-based qualitative research involving in-person and remote semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation with urban refugees, local and central government officials and international and national refugee-serving organizations between 2019 and 2021. This project was funded through Cities Alliance/UN Office for Project Services by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

The Ugandan context

Uganda is widely considered to be one of the world’s most progressive host countries, allowing refugees the right to work and freedom of movement and promoting self-reliance through national strategies since the 1990s. As of the end of July 2022, Uganda hosted a whopping 1,528,057 refugees and asylum seekers, driven in large part by ongoing conflict in South Sudan (UNHCR, 2022a). Indeed, at the time of research South Sudanese refugees made up the majority of refugees in the country, followed by Congolese, Burundians and Somalis (UNHCR, 2022a).

According to UNHCR (2022b), there are over 93,000 urban refugees in the country. However, according to the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), there are 300,000 refugees residing in Kampala, the country’s capital (Saliba and Silver, 2020). The number differs due to the fact that KCCA takes into account ‘those who are registered in settlements but nonetheless spend considerable amounts of time living in Kampala’ (Saliba and Silver, 2020). The number also includes household members of refugee families who have not yet gone through the official asylum process.

The West Nile region is one major refugee-hosting area in Uganda. With 3 million inhabitants, the region hosts around 700,000 refugees concentrated in the district of Arua (UN Habitat, 2020). Arua District hosts around 250,000 South Sudanese refugees – an estimated 24 per cent of its population, including those living in the Imvepi, Rhino and Rhino extension (Omugo) settlements. A town since 1974, Arua officially gained city status in 2020, although it is often still referred to as a town by its inhabitants. Arua sits near four refugee settlements – Bidi Bidi, Adjumani, Rhino and Imvepi – which are some of the largest in the country, and is only 75 km from the border with South Sudan. In part due to this proximity to settlements and the border, Arua government officials estimate that many of these refugees reside in and outside of Arua City. The following section considers the structure of the Ugandan government with a particular focus on the flows and blockages of power within the government and the impacts this has on urban refugees and the cities and towns hosting them.

(Unequal) distributions of power: decentralization and urban refugee hosting in Uganda

Examining the structure of the Ugandan government is important to better understand how the refugee regime plays out at different levels of government and within different geographies such as at the urban or regional level. While ‘government’ is often discussed as a block unit, Uganda’s decentralized system means that power is in theory diffuse, which is reminiscent of the Foucauldian conceptualization of power. Local governments are considered to be key players in Uganda’s decentralized system. The government is divided into districts, cities (city divisions), municipalities and hundreds and thousands of lower administrative units (United Cities and Local Government [UCLG], nd). The local government system is based on districts, which are composed of local government councils and administrative unit councils; these two bodies are collectively referred to as local councils and are further categorized as urban or rural (UN Habitat, 2020). Municipal as well as district councils have responsibility for providing primary and secondary education, water supplies and health services but have no official role in refugee reception. Refugee policy is the responsibility of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), which is headquartered in Kampala and has suboffices in or near refugee settlements throughout the country. OPM receives and delegates most refugee-related funding provided by the international community.

While Uganda’s decentralization has many proponents, others view it as an ultimate means to consolidate control. As an employee of one longstanding refugee-serving organization in Kampala explained in an interview in 2021:

In Uganda decentralization is not really decentralization in ways it’s been touted. It has happened not for reasons of extending services

but instead of extending patronage networks and control processes right down to very local level. The more districts you have, the more district commissioners you have – who are all political appointees. Endless districts have been created, but they are all under-resourced ... So now you have towns gaining city status: but does it come with resources that are commensurate? No.

This was echoed by a municipal employee in Arua, who explained: ‘Over time, the resources have been split between more and more districts. Today there are 135 districts and 41 municipalities – and before decentralization there were 39!’ (interview with A.M., 2021).

This becomes all the more complicated given that, like many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda is quickly urbanizing. As of July 2020, as part of a broader plan to create 15 cities across Uganda as approved by the cabinet in 2019 ([Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment \[ACODE\], 2020](#)), four former towns received formal city status, including Arua. Cities have a special role in the government system as laid out in the Local Governments Act 1997, Section 4, which states that a city is equivalent to a district. This explains, in part, the importance of Arua’s redesignation from a town to a city, as this change provides it with more authority within the national governance system and, local authorities and refugee advocates hope, more sway in raising awareness of urban refugees and the city needs that accompany them.

While the creation of new cities in Uganda has occurred in part as a response to the country’s rapid urbanization, this urbanization is problematic. As the Uganda-based advocacy think tank ACODE explains:

The growth and expansion of Municipal Councils in Uganda has over the years taken place without corresponding physical and socio-economic infrastructure. This in part is due to the delay in the upgrading of these governance structures to Cities. Approved human resource and other institutional structures of Municipal Councils; and the available funding levels do not position Municipal Councils to adequately meet administrative and socio-economic needs of the ever-increasing number of their residents. ([ACODE, 2020](#))

Urban power by counting; under-resourced by design

While the situation described in the previous section would likely have negative effects on any population, it can be compounded by the sudden increases in populations that forced migration can bring. Many municipalities are at the forefront of urban displacement, and, while they may in fact be open or even eager to address it, they often lack the financial and technical

resources to adequately do so, as well as connections to the international humanitarian and development actors that might be able to facilitate a more comprehensive response. Such is the case in Arua and, likely, other cities in Uganda and beyond as well. As one UN informant summarized:

People are moving to cities to find refuge and cities struggle to meet basic strains as a result of population size – this affects garbage, water provision, even local jobs, and housing markets go up. So both host communities and refugees are looking at city leaders, but they are often completely unempowered both technically and financially. At the same time donors ... often prefer established partners. So the question is, how do we make the humanitarian system better able to support local governance in both the short and the long term? (UN Informant, Uganda, January 2022)

Research on the role of local politics in the Middle East with respect to Syrian refugees notes that municipalities' opportunities to obtain additional funding for refugee assistance from central governments and public and private donors played a key role in the response refugees received (Betts et al, 2017). Yet, in the absence of such support, municipalities risk becoming de facto first and last responders with limited means at their disposal.

Arua City represents a paradoxical case in this regard due to the significant financial investment in the region. Due to its border proximity and number of forcibly displaced people, the district the city sits within, Arua District, has become a non-governmental organization (NGO) and donor hub, including for large actors such as the European Union (EU) Trust Fund. As such, it represents an important site for ongoing development investment, representing the positive impact that proximity to refugee camps and settlements may have. For example, funded through the EU Trust Fund, the German development agency Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) invested 10 million euros between 2018 and 2022 to strengthen Arua District's local governments alongside two other districts, so that they could increase basic service provision to both refugees and host communities (GIZ, 2022). However, this funding and capacity building was directed to district local governments rather than municipalities within the district, meaning that neither they nor Arua's refugee and non-refugee inhabitants necessarily benefitted from this investment. Although international attention to Arua City has increased in recent years, municipal funds from the central government have not increased, and the city's education, health and basic infrastructure are inadequate for its new population size, with negative impacts for refugees and host citizens alike.

This disjuncture illustrates the importance of a political economy approach when examining urban refugees and the cities they reside in and, in particular,

of an examination of power as conceptualized in Foucauldian discourse, including access to finances, at local, regional, national and international levels by a range of government and non-government actors, and refugees themselves. Like the need for critical examinations of government decentralization, these issues link to the humanitarian agenda of localization, in which both funding and responsibility are to be devolved to ‘national and local actors’ ([World Humanitarian Summit \[WHS\], 2016](#)). However, as this analysis illustrates, it is important to critically enquire what ‘national’ as well as ‘local’ means, given the multiplicity of actors operating at each level, often with separate interests and aims in a structure that has been termed ‘organized hypocrisy’ ([Krasner, 1999](#)). This enquiry is all the more relevant given the existence of refugees, who may never be considered ‘national’ actors in terms of holding citizenship but certainly play roles as ‘local’ ones, as demonstrated through the case of Arua.

In Uganda, one clear way that control is exerted by central government over smaller administrative units such as municipalities is through funding. Taxes are collected by the central government and then distributed as grants to districts. Although local governments’ primary source of revenue is transfers from the central government, they are mandated to raise revenue locally from property taxes, licences and user fees ([Commonwealth Local Government Forum \[CLGF\], 2018](#)). Districts and municipal councils also have the responsibility to provide public infrastructures such as ‘the provision of primary and secondary education, safe water supplies and public health, and are encouraged to devolve some services to the lower tiers. In addition, Local Economic Development (LED) is the responsibility of the districts and lower tiers of government’ ([CLGF, 2018](#)). However, funding for municipalities is based in part on population sizes, which are determined from often outdated censuses. While Uganda’s Local Governments Act provides formulas for resource allocation including number of inhabitants, refugees and asylum seekers are not included in this equation. In what was the most recent census at the time of research published by the Government of Uganda’s Bureau of Statistics (2020), for example, refugees were not mentioned at all. The 2024 Uganda national census, however, did explicitly include refugees and for the first time included urban refugees in cities beyond Kampala, illustrating positive change to further build on ([Cities Alliance 2024](#)).

Despite decentralization being a key policy reform for the Ugandan government in the early 1990s, municipalities still struggle to access the funding they need in order to operate. This issue is compounded by the fact that in Uganda refugee issues, and the concomitant international resources, are generally dealt with at a district level. UNHCR data on refugees in the country provide, for example, information on numbers in the main refugee-hosting districts but do not have more detailed figures of refugees’

geographic locations except for estimates for camps and settlements. In Arua, as refugees are not formally counted as urban inhabitants, no additional funding is allocated to yearly budgets to account for the increased demand on services that this significant number of people creates. This combination of lack of data and funding makes it very difficult for cities such as Arua to adequately plan and provide for all their residents (Lozet and Easton-Calabria, 2020).

This, in turn, reflects a chicken-or-egg dilemma facing municipalities in many refugee-hosting countries: only recognizing refugees as such if they are in settlements or in Kampala, rather than in other urban areas, leads to a lack of data on those urban refugees who have settled regardless of policy. However, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, both of which Uganda has ratified, define refugees in relation to persecution and other reasons for flight rather than where they are based within a host county. However, until this is recognized in the country, ‘spontaneously settled’ refugees in urban areas are at best invisible and at worst targeted and vilified.

Of course, just because refugees are not counted does not mean they are not there. In 2020, a census of Central Division, Arua, conducted by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, Association of Volunteers in International Service Foundation and Cities Alliance, and financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, found that 10 per cent of the population in the division, which represents the former Arua municipality, were refugees (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2021). More strikingly, the Arua Census sheds light on how terminology can obscure the reality of forced migration: an examination of ‘recent migrants’ to Arua (defined as those who have arrived within the last five years) shows that a striking 95.1 per cent hold refugee status (Cities Alliance, 2022). Given this and other research that identifies many refugees living outside central Arua due to the lower cost of living, the figure for the town as a whole is likely much higher. The Arua census on refugees and migrants, which covered only 3 per cent of Arua City, thus recommends a ‘more comprehensive, inclusive and conclusive census’, in particular by covering the outskirts of the city (Cities Alliance, 2022), in order to better determine the number of refugee inhabitants.

Urban refugees, statistics and (in)visibility

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault (2007: 87) writes of ‘the triangle formed by government, population and political economy’, discussing a shift at the end of the 18th century when population overtook territory as the main preoccupation of the state, linking economic theories and political practices as embodiments of new power relations, which themselves are intertwined. This discussion of political economy is connected to familiar Foucauldian themes of surveillance and control, given that statistics, data

and demography are seen as useful tools for the regulative management of populations.

Just as citizens belong to a country, residents belong to a city – yet in the case of Uganda, refugees may not keep their legal refugee status when residing in any city except the capital and instead are legally classified as voluntary migrants if they leave settlements. As will be further discussed, this has myriad implications for their protection and access to services. It is also clearly linked to financial incentives and disincentives for the Ugandan central government. Housing refugees in settlements is cheaper for the government of Uganda, for example, as it receives significant international financial support for that and does not need to allocate more funding to urban areas on the basis of larger populations.

Bringing city, settlement and national regulations into discussions on urban refugees

Foucault (2007: 90) asks, ‘How and under what conditions can a sovereign maintain his sovereignty?’ As part of this examination, he posits ‘the emergence of population as the correlate of power and the object of knowledge’ (2007: 79). Yet, in the case of refugees, and of our case study here in particular, we see a reluctance by the host government to bring this swathe of population under its own control. Insofar as it does not simply deny the statistics, but prevents the *creation* of statistics through excluding refugees as inhabitants and thus rendering them ineligible for inclusion in censuses, we find not the overreach of government, which is so commonly critiqued in terms of undertaking surveillance, but instead the isolation of the state from a populace through its lack of acknowledgement: if urban refugees are not formally able to be registered and are left uncounted, are they there at all?

The answer, of course, is a straightforward yes – with the caveat that determining numbers is not so straightforward. Most available government literature for Uganda does not include information on the funding structure and allocation of budgets to local governments, particularly to support refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). There is no specific mention of emergency funds or funds for registering refugees and IDPs in urban settings – which is no surprise for the reasons covered previously. Instead, the central government, and sometimes regional or district governments, are predominantly responsible along with international partners and donors for addressing forced migration in the country.

However, international humanitarian and development actors effectively have their hands tied when it comes to offering services to refugees in urban areas as they cannot go against government policy. Interviews with members of Arua Municipality and international NGOs (INGOs) with offices in Arua reveal a lack of tailored programmes to meet urban refugees’ needs, while

refugees themselves in Arua explain that they receive no INGO support. Interestingly, although a range of INGOs have offices in Arua, none of those interviewed had urban programmes. Instead, they operate in one of the nearby refugee settlements. A member of UNHCR bluntly explained this rationale: ‘UNHCR and INGOs can’t operate in secondary cities because of the government’s policy [of refugees only being recognized in settlements or Kampala]. They don’t want to create a pull factor’ (UNHCR, Kampala, January 2022).

These constraints extend to donors as well, who discussed often delicately broaching or simply sidestepping conversations about urban refugees with government actors. As one interview informant working in a major European donor agency explained:

Within the CRRF [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework], where we have representatives from development and donor actors – we have always the humanitarian raising the urban refugee issues. From the governance side, we also have projects on it, but they are more focused on city-strengthening than urban refugees directly ... We may have to recognize urban refugees in other cities ... but we are not there yet. (Donor, remote interview, February 2022)

In an examination of Foucault’s work on population, Bruce Curtis (2002) argues that the concept of population gives rise to new state forms alongside new types of knowledge, subjectivities and objects of intervention. Expanding on the history of census making, which various thinkers have long held as a vital technique of government, Curtis (2002: 508–9) writes: ‘As an object of knowledge, population is primarily a statistical artefact.’ Foucault’s writing on the ‘discovery’ of populations, in which both the individuality and totality of people become the preoccupation of government logic and practice, is interesting to consider in the case of refugees as unacknowledged city inhabitants. Although they exist – attending schools, selling goods, paying rent – the central government has not yet ‘discovered’ them, which would entail them being ‘known through political economy and organized through apparatuses of security’ (Curtis, 2002: 511). Population, in this reading, is a political-statistical concept whose relevance in the case of ‘recognizing refugees’ we can link – although not reduce – to financial incentives on the part of the government of Uganda. While, as will be further discussed, a variety of avenues exist through which assistance to urban refugees and the cities they live in can be increased, they are limited without the support of the Ugandan government and a commitment to changing policies that impede refugees’ eligibility for assistance outside of settlements. In short, if refugees cannot be ‘known’ as an urban population through being either named or counted, then, at least officially, they cannot be helped. This represents a

paradoxical twist on Foucauldian discussions of surveillance and control. It serves to remind us that – just as many people choose not to be registered as refugees *anywhere* – it remains a category of privilege, with protection being presented in this sense as a correlate of control.

Settlement–city refugee inflows

Regardless of politics, statistics and levels of funding, refugees continue to arrive in Arua. As part of this research, 50 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugees in Arua between 2020 and 2021. Forty-eight of the informants were registered at a settlement, with the majority registered at Imvepi or Rhino Settlement and the remainder at Bidi Bidi. While Bidi Bidi is a large refugee settlement with close to a quarter of a million registered refugees when this research was undertaken (UNHCR, 2021), Imvepi and Rhino are smaller settlements which had between 60,000 and 80,000 inhabitants in 2020 and 2021. Refugees receive food rations and do not pay for rent in settlements, but other opportunities are limited. When asked why they had come to Arua from settlements, most informants cited needing better education for their children and to study themselves. As one informant explained: ‘The civil war in South Sudan made me come to Uganda and I could settle in the city [after going to the settlement] because I needed to have access to the services that are not in the settlement’ (interview with informant no 2).

Attaining education for their children or themselves was the most common reason why informants left settlements for Arua, followed by seeking better health facilities. One mother from South Sudan explained: ‘The civil war in South Sudan forced me to come to Uganda, I settled in Rhino refugee settlement but when my baby got very sick, I was forced to move to Arua to access better health facilities for my child’ (interview with informant no 20). The head of OPM in Arua echoed these reasons, citing pull factors for refugees to Arua as including more educational opportunities than in settlements, medical referrals to clinics in Arua, better business opportunities and a chance to use professional skills, plus security needs.

Yet, regardless of opportunities real or imagined, urban refugees face myriad challenges. The rising cost of rent, food and transport were cited as the biggest challenges, along with the limited freedom of movement and the closure of schools. Many of these challenges are faced by the urban poor in Arua as well, while others such as the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic affected all parents and children in the city. One South Sudanese refugee, a mother of two, explained:

Living in Arua is really so challenging in that rent is so expensive for me to afford a good house for my family. Landlords keep increasing

rent charges, which made me move to where I am right now. The high prices in the market on food items have been hard, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown yet the food I receive from the settlement cannot sustain my family to the end of the month. (Interview with S.S., 2021)

Refugees interviewed describe surviving in the city through a combination of small business and food rations from the settlement they are registered in. Some sold juice, chapattis or Sudanese cakes on the streets of Arua, while others worked as casual day labour. Several depended solely on food rations from the settlement, while others depended on family remittances as well as food rations. One respondent explained: ‘I support my family with the food rations I receive from the settlement and I also sell part of it to get money which I use for other needs of the family’ (interview with informant no 43).

Urban–settlement mobility: circular migration as an invisible coping strategy

As is evident in the responses in the previous section, even if refugees are living in Arua, many make regular trips back to the settlement to collect food rations and visit family members or friends. Most of the refugees interviewed were registered in one of the nearby refugee settlements and generally returned to the settlements monthly to receive food rations. While not officially allowed, this livelihood strategy enabled some refugees to pursue livelihoods in Arua City while still receiving much-needed extra support. While Imvepi and Rhino Settlements are closer to Arua City and located in Arua District, which likely accounts for the high number of informants registered there, Bidi Bidi is farther away in Yumbe District. However, none of these settlements is actually very close to Arua City: Imvepi is 20 km and Rhino around 60 km away, but, due to the poor condition of the roads, journeys are often slow. This dual proximity/distance was heightened through COVID-19 lockdown measures, when non-essential movement was prohibited, meaning some refugees did not travel or else had to travel in dangerous night-time conditions. Several reported having motorcycle accidents during these trips due to a combination of bad roads and lack of light. However, for those that did make the trip, the risk was worth it: they needed to feed their families.

Combined with the disruption of livelihood activities, this lack of access to food placed an exceptional burden on urban refugees’ ability to take care of themselves and their families. As one South Sudanese refugee in Arua explained in response to a question about refugee needs during the COVID-19 pandemic: ‘Since there is no data on how many refugees are in the city, there is no special consideration for the refugees in terms of food provision by the organizations’ (quoted in [Lozet and Easton–Calabria](#),

2020: 80). However, even apart from the extra stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this research found a troubling lack of support for refugees in Arua, which the pandemic only exacerbated: none of the refugee informants had ever received any assistance from the central or municipal government, citing lack of information or ineligibility due to being refugees.

Compounding this, the food rations provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) in the settlements were cut by 30 per cent in April 2020 and further cut in February 2021, leaving refugees with only 60 per cent of a full ration (WFP, 2021). A WFP food assessment survey found refugees in all 13 settlements in Uganda had ‘acute food insecurity’. Given this situation, it is little wonder that many refugees leave settlements in search of work opportunities, or that circular migration acts as a livelihood, and indeed survival, strategy.

This further illustrates how the presence of urban refugees is the outcome not just of pull factors such as job, health care or education illustrated earlier but of *push* factors of the same nature. The progressive defunding of many long-term refugee settlements in Uganda and many other countries has led to inadequate livelihood, health and education programming (which were likely to have rarely been sufficient in the first place) (Salant, 2017). Just as some refugees leave – or never enter – settlements and camps due to their skillsets, needs and living preferences, others leave once they realize that life in these settlements is unsustainable for them. This is particularly striking as Uganda has received considerable attention internationally for its generous approach to local integration, including allowing refugees to farm plots of land in settlements and have access to basic services such as education and health care alongside local Ugandans. Indeed, Uganda is a pilot country of the CRRF and one of UNHCR’s priority countries for livelihoods initiatives, for example, driven by the 2014–18 Global Strategy for Livelihoods. However, as one researcher on refugees in Uganda summarized:

In Uganda, the gap between rhetoric and reality remains considerable. Despite much talk about progressiveness, Uganda has merely rebranded camps as local settlements. Humanitarian aid is still directed to these settlements, making it harder to find genuine alternatives to encampment. Refugees who move to cities in Uganda continue to be largely excluded from support beyond legal status, and sometimes not even that. (Hovil, 2018)

Indeed, this invisible coping strategy of regular urban–settlement mobility in both directions represents a strategy in defiance of official settlement policy, in which only refugees granted official permission are allowed to leave. As one head of a refugee-serving organization explained:

There is a story about Uganda as heaven on earth for refugees, as the country with the most progressive policies, but the reality is that there is this longstanding practice that you have freedom of movement in principle but in practice if you want help [humanitarian assistance], you have to be sitting in a refugee settlement. But if you're in a settlement then you're meant to get authorization to leave – this means that, in practice, freedom of movement is extremely circumscribed. It also means that the majority of people in urban areas are still left hanging by the humanitarian system. The infrastructure is not really there to accommodate or process urban refugees properly ... There is really only one place for urban refugees to get registered in the whole country – Kampala. (Staff, refugee-serving organization, interview, May 2021)

The head of OPM in Arua agreed with this, though he also stated that there was an unwritten policy of refugees being allowed to stay in the city. However, he noted a contradiction that makes it harder for urban refugees to receive services in Arua and other urban areas: the government of Uganda drafted the national refugee policy while UNHCR wrote the urban refugee policy (interview with a member of OPM Arua). It was noted by several organizations that although the poorest refugees generally stayed in the settlements, it was often those with the highest security needs, ranging from ongoing persecution by armed actors or discrimination due to being LGBTQ+, or extreme vulnerabilities such as disabilities, that came to urban areas. The lack of support for refugees in urban areas, therefore, represents a lack of assistance to some of those who need assistance and protection the most.

Looking ahead: ‘discovering’ the city as a host for refugees

While much of the preceding discussion has focused on both the presence and non-acknowledgement of urban refugees, it is also important to return to considerations of government decentralization and how assistance is and could be channelled to urban refugees. The creation of the Global Cities Fund, co-led by the Mayors Migration Council (MMC), represents one attempt to address funding gaps in refugee- and migrant-hosting cities, insofar as cities are directly funded to implement projects they themselves design (MMC, nd). Cities Alliance is in the process of developing a campaign for more direct financing to refugee-hosting cities in the West Nile region, which has been met with enthusiasm by external as well as many national actors.

Interestingly, such initiatives and campaigns, in seeking to illuminate both the gaps and efforts in cities and towns hosting refugees, engage in a parallel

process akin to Foucauldian discussions on the recognition of populations: the ‘discovery’ of cities as places of hosting and refuge for refugees. While, as previous quotes have shown, different actors feel differing levels of ability to engage in discussions on urban refugees, a growing contingent are pushing for not only wider recognition of the needs of urban refugee-hosting areas but in so doing are seeking to direct funding to address it. Given this, the CRRF Secretariat and CRRF activities in Uganda may be a further avenue to explore how to achieve wider recognition and support of urban refugees in secondary cities in Uganda.

However, it is imperative that funding for urban refugees is not funding taken *away* from settlements. Indeed, in returning to the linkages of camps and cities, it is important to remember that the need for increased urban service provision in Arua and elsewhere that can accommodate both hosts and refugees is also connected to the underinvestment in West Nile settlements. As an example, the 2021 South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan, which provides support for refugees in Uganda and other countries hosting South Sudanese refugees, was underfunded by a staggering 83.2 per cent – a shortfall of 721.5 million USD (FTS OCHA, 2022). The reality of this limited assistance helps explain widespread concern by informants with regard to how urban service provision to refugees would be financed, if indeed it could be provided at all. Interviews illustrate a fear that this funding would come at the expense of funding in settlements, with emphatic rejections of this as a ‘solution’. Yet this also raises the question: if settlements and camps were better funded and indeed able to adequately provide for their inhabitants, would funding for urban service provision be such a need at all? Of course, the answer, given the world’s urbanizing trend, is likely ‘yes’, but there is more to examine through this question, as well.

When we speak of political economy in refugee assistance and examine the flows of capital as well as people between camps, settlements and cities, it is often the paucity of funding that stands out against the rising levels of need. It is not surprising, for example, to learn that, without proper data or funding, stretched local governments are struggling to address the issue of forcibly displaced people. Alongside this challenge, there appear to be problematic gaps in communication, funding and the devolution of leadership to local municipalities like Arua that are experiencing influxes of forcibly displaced people – and a problematic lack of recognition of how cities such as Arua are affected by nearby settlements. This, in turn, indicates a need to further explore the particular role that refugee-hosting secondary cities and counties have alongside camps and settlements and national, regional and international policies and frameworks relating to forced displacement.

If we view refugee hosting holistically – as indeed Uganda’s area-based approach to refugee hosting seeks to do – then we see not only settlement or city systems but instead a larger network within which the presence or

absence – of finances, populations, political will and leadership – affects not one or the other but both. While some policies, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development’s (IGAD) Kampala Convention, for example, would seem to support the movement of refugees into cities to work and improve their livelihoods, other policies at the national and even settlement level pose restrictions. This holds true at the national–international level, as well, where, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the context, interest in refugee hosting is contingent on receiving external assistance, and the ability to channel international support to populations such as urban refugees is, in turn, dependent on policies at the national level.

As this chapter has detailed, political economy examinations of refugee responses can offer grounded, holistic analyses to both micro and meso explorations of power within the international refugee regime, including how power is enacted or curtailed within governmental or humanitarian systems. Other political economy research on refugee assistance in Uganda has brought to light how refugees often become embedded in global capitalism as exploited workers instead of aid recipients (Ramsay, 2020), with some work going farther to analyse the role of the humanitarian sector in these outcomes (Easton-Calabria, 2022). In exploring how power does not circumvent responsibility according to sector or geography, such studies highlight how – despite the international nature of their creation – refugees are often still considered in silos: as actors connected to humanitarianism but not the global economy, or as inhabitants of camps but not cities. While work within camp studies critically engages with notions of power and control (for example Diken, 2004), including refugee agency (for example Sanyal, 2014), there is a need for this research to extend beyond the camp setting and instead encompass larger relationships of and between power, capital and rights; these affect refugees in camps as well as in urban areas and certainly their decision making to move between them. Illustrating the relevance of these considerations, ethnographic political economy research on the Zambian government’s attempts to control its urban refugee population explores refugees’ strategies outside the state system while still stating that ‘real questions need to be asked about what those strategies look like in practice, particularly in light of the very powerful national and international interests that are also at play in urban areas’ (Frischkorn, 2015: 207).

Yet in global and sometimes national discourses on refugee reception, the restrictions faced by both urban refugees and those seeking to assist them are rarely taken into account. Key to more fruitful discussions on refugees in both urban areas and camps is the contextualization of how refugees are received, ‘managed’ and of course respond, and an awareness that answers to these rely on both what *is* and *isn’t* available within and beyond camps – as well as who *is* and *isn’t* counted in urban areas. Importantly, this understanding stems from exploring the roles,

both broad and narrow, of different actors involved in the global refugee regime, including the often underacknowledged role of municipal and local authorities in the reception of urban refugees. A wider understanding of how camps affect cities and vice versa must be gained and acted on as global displacement continues. As refugee camps, settlements and cities seek to gain the resources and tools they need to host the displaced people who – formally acknowledged or not – continue to arrive, much remains to be both counted and discovered.

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Refugee Accommodation Industries: Migration Governance, Profit and City Making

René Kreichauf

Introduction

Favouring Agambenian-inspired ideas of the camp as a space of exception and immobilization or focusing on social microstructures in camps such as refugee agency, social relations, resistance and daily practices, research on refugee accommodation in Europe has often neglected the industries, economies and services that have evolved with and around accommodation, as well as the actors involved in them, their connections to urban development and governance and their role in shaping migration processes. Introducing an urban political-economic perspective to the local turn in refugee governance and the study of refugee migration and accommodation in European cities, this chapter analyses refugee accommodation from a migration industry perspective.

The concept of a migration industry has emerged in the context of the commercialization of international and refugee migration ([Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013](#)) and as a way of understanding the ‘intertwinement of actors, practices, and infrastructures geared towards the provision of an increasingly diverse array of migration-related services’ ([Cohen et al, 2022](#): 2165). Migration industries work to facilitate, enable and control mobility patterns through the services and infrastructures they offer, mediating ‘between individual migrants and a migration system or regime’ ([Collins, 2021](#): 868). Thus, they facilitate, assist and limit migration and settlement in ways that turn migration processes into an economy ([Cranston et al, 2018](#)). Moreover, ‘migration industries are profoundly urbanized’: they

are involved in and contribute to city-making processes and specific local productions (Cohen et al, 2022: 2166).

Consequently, studying the industries involved in and constituted by refugee camps and accommodation not only enables an understanding of the global–local complexity and negotiations of actors, practices and articulations relevant for the production, operation and proliferation of accommodation but also allows for an interrogation of the social, economic, political and spatial processes, logics and contexts through which accommodation unfolds and is (re)produced in cities. This opens the door to conceptualizing and situating refugee camps and accommodation as ‘quintessential geographies of the modern’ (Sanyal, 2014: 558) (with)in broader economic frameworks, market-oriented urban governance and urban development processes, empirically acknowledging and theoretically contributing to the local turn in refugee governance and refugee studies.

Against this backdrop, the chapter examines the migration industry that emerges with and through the ‘forced infrastructure’ of refugee accommodation and the ways the migration industry configures and (re)produces it (Kreichauf, 2018). The term *refugee accommodation industry* (RAI) captures both the set of state and non-state actors, institutions, organizations, practices and services that refugees become entangled with upon their arrival for the creation of profit and localized value and the global–local relations between the members of that set. Applied to the case of refugee accommodation in Berlin, this analysis reveals the complexity of actors who sometimes cooperate and at other times conflict in the making of the accommodation industry and infrastructure. It shows that this industry is deeply intertwined with, and characterized by, neoliberal urban governance and market restructuring processes, including phases of privatization and remunicipalization that bolster both the private and public sectors.

Moreover, the research presented here illustrates that RAIs and infrastructure are not temporary side effects of refugee arrival and external to urban processes. Rather, they are becoming an integral part of the negotiation and making of urban housing provision and urban development itself. In Berlin, the RAI is an entry point and experimental field for urban and housing planning where new opportunities for profiting from refugees are created, normalizing and entrenching refugee accommodation in urban areas. It generates revenue around, and provides new opportunities for, urban development trends and new but questionable modes of urban housing. This research thus ‘responds to calls to attend to site-specific local contexts in critical analyses of immigration control’ and the negotiation of migration in cities and localities (Conlon and Hiemstra, 2022: 2193).

The chapter begins with a scrutiny of literature on the migration industry and its relation to city making to explain how and why commercial activities and services related to refugee accommodation are conceptualized as the RAI.

Next the processes and actors involved in Berlin's RAI are examined in detail, with accommodation industries seen as means of economic development and localized profitable opportunities for various actors. This reveals the complex ways through which an accommodation industry and infrastructure are (re)produced. Finally, an explanation of how accommodation industries make cities is provided, contributing to urban development processes and new forms of urban housing.

The migration industry and refugee accommodation

Since the 2000s, there has been a shift in refugee protection 'from a supposedly humanitarian imperative to an economic incentive', transforming refugees from economic burdens to economic benefits and 'reducing the value of human life to the potential to extract economic productivity' (Ramsay, 2020: 3). The increasingly blurred line between humanitarian protection and economic exploitation is embedded in broader commercialization processes surrounding international and refugee migration, where the movement of people provides 'a host of new opportunities' to 'capitalize on migrants' desire to move, or on the struggle governments face to manage migratory flows' (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013: 2). Because 'the neoliberal logics of privatization have entrenched the outsourcing of industry services across an industrial complex of state and non-state actors', refugee protection and management have become a big business that is constantly in need of sustenance and growth (Morris, 2021: 2693). Therefore, the rationality of refugees and the expansion of the global legal refugee regime have generated an enormous international capital enterprise, enhancing markets in asylum and refugee services, management and containment. These emerging markets have turned migration – and asylum seeking in particular – into 'a product up for sale', configuring 'a complex and diversifying asylum industry that is produced and sustained by the everyday realities of global capitalism' (McGuirk and Pine, 2020: 1–2).

The migration industry involves a whole 'array of non-state actors who provide services that facilitate, constrain or assist international migration' and capture the ways in which migration is embedded in processes of capital accumulation (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013: 6–7). However, it is not just non-state actors, profit making and the commercialization and privatization of migration that are the core factors 'behind' the emergence of the migration industry (Salt and Stein, 1997). Some scholars have called for the inclusion of 'various public and private agencies and actors' who provide services and infrastructure, 'thereby facilitating and organising the process of migration' (Spaan and Hillmann, 2013: 64). Consequently, more recent research defines the migration industry, its actors and its functions more broadly based on 'the *labour* involved in managing, facilitating and controlling

migration that makes this an industry' (Cranston et al, 2018: 544, emphasis added). This means that the migration industry includes actors, institutions and organizations that intercede 'between the micro-level social networks, and the state level and international institutions' and provide infrastructures and services necessary for migration (Cranston et al, 2018: 546). Therefore, the migration industry is not only 'a business' but also reflects the migration-related markets, practices, relations, networks and infrastructures through which migration is negotiated and shaped and so becomes an economy. Nevertheless, for a huge portion of actors, the production of migrants – the displaced in particular – has become the bedrock for the creation of revenue, while facilitating the institutional terrain of expanding migration and refugee regimes.

The process of assisting, conditioning, structuring and enabling 'the movement of migrants for profit does not end with their arrival at the destination society's national territory, but continues *after* migrants have entered the territory, that is, at the level of municipalities and cities' (Bernt et al, 2022: 2221; emphasis in original). Since the 2000s, cities have become the preferred space and scale for the implementation of migration management policies and control technologies. This rescaling of migration governance has been taking place 'under the auspices of a neoliberal reorganization of public policy, by the general downloading of responsibility to lower levels of governance' (Schmidtke, 2014: 87), and it has created a demand for services and infrastructures at the local level. As part of this local turn, localities and cities have become 'the places where migration-related services, functions of migration control and management, and the invention of migration-related products are increasingly organised in private and profitable ways' (Cohen et al, 2022: 2168). Against this background, migration or asylum 'industries are imbricated in contemporary urbanisation processes' in ways that have made cities and migration industries co-constitutive (Cohen et al, 2022: 2166–7).

Refugee camps and accommodations are a 'crucial part of the global political economy' of refugee regimes (Morris, 2021: 2691). As instruments of migration control, containment, channelling and bordering, they regulate and spatially 'fix' refugees, thereby creating multi-layered and complex opportunities for profit extraction, in which the ongoing displacement and management of refugees in these places makes them valuable (see Kreichauf, 2023). On a global scale, refugee camps 'have become lucrative economic investments for UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], INGO [international non-governmental organizations], NGO [non-governmental organizations], corporate, government, and other local partners', constituting a multibillion-dollar business around camp construction, provision and services (Morris, 2021: 2691). But also within the camps, and created by refugees, there are evolving economies that – as

scholarship on camps in the Global South indicates – are entangled with urban economic formations, urban space and urban development (Agier et al, 2002; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014). Because refugees often have to transit through or ultimately end up in refugee camps, ‘camps may emerge where movement slows down due to a blockage’ (Turner and Whyte, 2022: 6), consequently putting refugees in relation to these macro- and micro-economic camp relations and dynamics.

In Europe, refugee camps and accommodations emerge not only for the sake of protection or for the provision of humanitarian relief but also because borders limit refugees’ journeys as well as because camps are a fundamental part of asylum laws and determination procedures. In accordance with the Common European Asylum System, the European Union (EU) reception directive and national asylum laws, newly arrived refugees are forced to stay in these facilities, usually for the duration of their asylum process. However, the responsibility for providing accommodation is downscaled, meaning that issues of maintenance, welfare support, social assistance and the control of refugees are transferred to cities and municipalities. Cities in Europe develop specific and localized accommodation policies, practices and places (Kreichauf, 2018), and it is within the local realm that accommodation becomes connected to a set of existing and emerging economies as well as to multiple actors involved in migration management. Here, too, refugee accommodation is embedded in larger processes of urban policy making, development and economic structures.

Refugee accommodations are infrastructures where displaced populations become entangled with the services surrounding their reception, and ‘where their future local or translocal social mobilities are produced as much as negotiated’ (Meeus et al, 2019: 1). It is within and through accommodation that different services and actors come together: state and non-state, for- and non-profit, humanitarian organizations, civil society actors including neighbourhood initiatives and residents, security staff, catering, social staff, police and refugees themselves – a wide variety of actors and different forms, aspects and interests that produce and configure refugee accommodation as a migration industry. As a result, the migration industry reveals ‘the articulations of the interactions between the economy, nation states, non-governmental organisations and the movement of people’ (Cranston et al, 2018: 543).

The political-legal and spatial practice of accommodating refugees in shelters and camps, their ‘waiting in situations of pressure and possibility before they move or are moved elsewhere’ (Turner and Whyte, 2022: 1), has created complex RAIs that contribute to the making, management and control of refugees through these industries’ related services, practices and infrastructures. RAIs condition refugees’ further movement, and through them refugees’ residential trajectories and incorporation processes are

negotiated and shaped (El Moussawi and Schuermans, 2021). Therefore, RAIs connect and mediate between movement, arrival, individual preference and choices of refugees in relation to this infrastructure and against the backdrop of the actors, services and spatial relations in play. Because in most EU countries the development of refugee accommodation is tightly linked to migration and asylum policies on different governmental levels, there is a continued connection between accommodation, industry and government. For these reasons, RAIs are characterized by the essential role of the state and state actors that becomes visible in the setting up of accommodation facilities and legal-political authority, and in the active and state-organized outsourcing of operation and management functions. There is an increasing economization of public actors that has become central to the attempt to generate revenue out of refugee accommodation and is crucial for the workings and making of RAIs.

RAI agents can have different interests and intentions (control, profit making, care, welfare), and the local work of the accommodation industry varies. The work can include any services related to survival (food provision, catering, shelter and so on), assistance (legal assistance, social care, language provision) and control (security staff, police, spatial settings). Through these services, social practices and relations emerge that in turn contribute to the shaping of refugees' movement or non-movement and further trajectories. An RAI operates on and comprises different scales ranging from place-specific and local to transnational and global, and the agents who form the industry differ in size, power, function and scalar position. Therefore, the accommodation industry can represent and comprise individual camps and shelters or entire accommodation systems (local, regional, national, transnational and global). That is, accommodation industries unfold within a site-specific locality and constitute a distinct spatiality and infrastructure, yet they are embedded in global processes. Viewing refugee accommodation through the lens of industry reveals the distinct services, practices and state and private actors – their interactions and negotiations – that make up RAIs and infrastructure and that regulate movement. Moreover, this perspective allows for a critical interrogation of the economic logics behind the workings of refugee shelters and their links to broader urban processes. The next section examines some of the actors and services involved in the development of Berlin's RAI and infrastructure and their links to broader processes including privatization, entrepreneurial remunicipalization and urban housing development.

Berlin's refugee accommodation industry

The organization of refugee accommodation in Berlin is a political, top-down, highly complex and institutionally organized but increasingly

fragmented and outsourced process. While federal asylum laws and dispersal policies provide the framework for reception and accommodation and dictate the number of arrivals, Berlin – due to its position as a German *Bundesland* (federate state) – has leeway regarding the development of institutional resources and local reception and accommodation policies, practices and infrastructures. As of February 2022, around 24,000 refugees resided in Berlin’s 82 accommodation units, building up an expansive industry composed of the different actors, services and interests in play. In the following section, the general processes and political approaches that have shaped accommodation provision are explained, followed by a closer examination of the local state and non-state actors and the services involved in Berlin’s RAI and the recent development of accommodation.

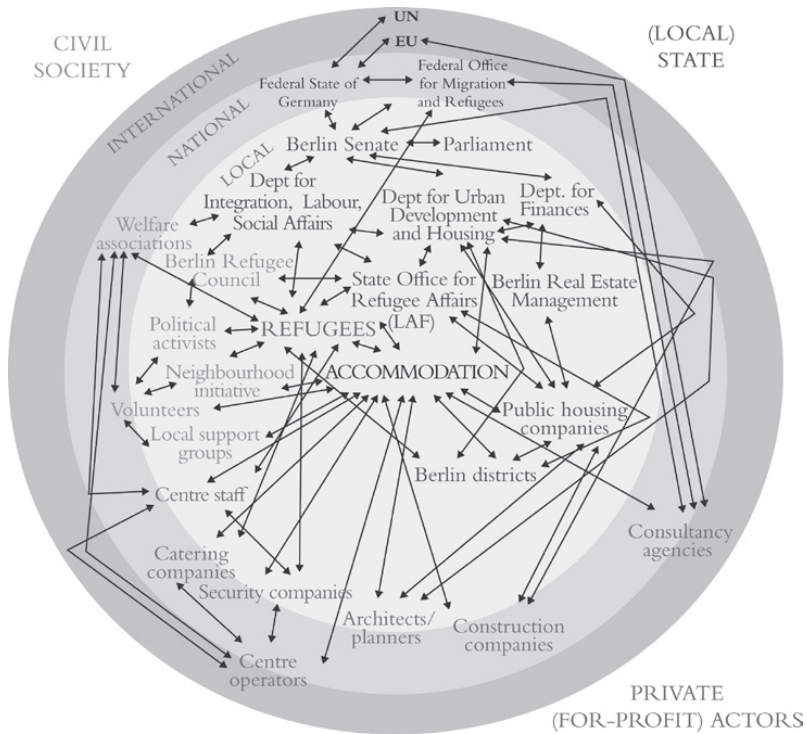
Making accommodation profitable: privatization and entrepreneurial remunicipalization

Berlin’s refugee accommodation provision has gone through intense restructuring and marketization processes since the beginning of the 2010s. The number of accommodation units, participating actors and services has been fluctuating and changing according to the quantity of arriving refugees, the public administration’s capacities to provide for them and shifts in local policy and migration management approaches. Moreover, accommodation infrastructures and services are constantly changing and reproducing. Neoliberal urbanism, along with the commodification and privatization of public goods, services and infrastructures, set the stage for the development of Berlin’s RAI. Leading up to and during the refugee reception crisis of 2015–16, Berlin’s government heavily privatized accommodation and related services and mostly contracted for-profit companies for the operation. This has created a market that treats refugees as economic objects from which to make a profit while significantly lowering care and living standards in accommodation. At the same time, ‘state devolution and privatization have effectively meant the opening up of new business opportunities’ and a market for global companies with a major influence on policy making (Raco, 2016: 16). Inspired by the international ‘success’ and self-proclaimed reputation of global consulting firm McKinsey & Company (which was contracted by Sweden, Greece and the EU to speed up asylum procedures), the Berlin Senate cooperated with this company in developing the Masterplan for Integration and Security (Berlin’s official refugee policy concept between 2015 and 2017) and reorganizing accommodation provision and development. Based on McKinsey’s ideas, the Berlin government developed the Refugee Housing Programme, which included the development of new and permanent accommodation units.

Since its development in 2016, the Refugee Housing Programme has significantly influenced government's role in providing accommodation, the shape of accommodation facilities and the purposes of accommodation as well as the economic imperatives and opportunities for non-state actors. At its core are the so-called MUFs (*Modulare Unterkünfte für Flüchtlinge* or 'modular dwellings for refugees'), prefab four- to six-storey housing developments with apartment-style layouts, thermal insulation and under-floor heating as well as security, entrance control and fencing. Plans call for a total of 52 MUFs, each housing up to 500 refugees, or 26,000 in total. As of August 2021, a total of 22 MUFs had been completed, accommodating around 10,000 people ([Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten \[Berlin State Office for Refugee Affairs – LAF\], 2022](#)). In contrast to previous forms of accommodation, the Senate for Urban Development as well as Berlin's six public housing companies exclusively plan and build the MUFs on city-owned (or purchased) land and predominantly with federal funding. But the fact that public authorities and corporations take over the planning and building of accommodation does not break with neoliberal understandings of how cities (and accommodation) are to be governed. Instead, it represents an 'entrepreneurial remunicipalization of accommodation' ([Kreichauf, 2023](#)), a mutation of neoliberal urbanism whereby municipal authorities take back privatized services and infrastructures in order to enhance local value creation and stabilize local market dynamics ([Paul and Cumbers, 2023](#)). In the case of Berlin's Refugee Housing Programme, this process is driven by private consultancy and includes a business-like organization and corporatization of the city's administration and public (housing) companies, which must focus on making surpluses as mandated by the government, while it enables the further outsourcing of operations and services (including construction and operation contracts and other services related to accommodation). This lays the groundwork for profit making by both corporatized public and private actors.

Moreover, the purpose of this programme is not solely to develop refugee accommodation but is in line with McKinsey's general agenda to use migration (and migrants) for valorization. Building accommodation is an instrument for developing urban land and new housing over and above a means of sheltering refugees. In phases, MUFs will also be built to provide housing for other vulnerable groups, either in the form of social housing or as dorms, homeless shelters and homes for the elderly. This is a way of adding housing for those who fall out of Berlin's strained housing market, thus making refugee accommodation valuable for profit extraction in multiple ways.

In the following sections, I analyse the actors involved and the negotiations and processes through which accommodation is developed and made profitable. [Figure 12.1](#) gives an overview and illustrates the complexity of

Figure 12.1: Actors involved in the development of refugee accommodation

Note: This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: Author

these actors, their relations to each other, the sector to which they belong and their workings and connections on different scales. The (local) state actors, private (for-profit) actors and civil society actors are differentiated, but all are related to and provide services and infrastructure in Berlin's RAI. For the sake of clarity, the focus here is on local state and some of the for-profit actors.

Local state actors and the financialization of refugee accommodation

Local state actors include all government and administrative bodies involved in deciding on and developing policies and setting up accommodation. Until the end of 2015, Berlin's State Office for Health and Social Affairs (Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales [LaGeSo]), a subdepartment of the Berlin Senate Department for Integration, Labour and Social Affairs (Senatsverwaltung für Integration, Arbeit und Soziales [SenIAS]), was responsible for the reception, accommodation and care of refugees during the

asylum procedure. Sparked by the refugee reception crisis and the failure of LaGeSo to cope with the growing number of arrivals, a new state office, LAF, was outsourced from LaGeSo. LAF was structured according to efficiency criteria and put in charge of all matters concerning asylum – an initiative proposed and guided by McKinsey. As seen in [Figure 12.1](#), LAF is the central public player regarding refugee accommodation. It oversees the management and strategic development of accommodation, decides occupancy and distributes refugees to single facilities, conducts procurement procedures and contracts operators and other service providers for accommodation units, besides negotiating the location of new accommodation with Senate departments and the 12 Berlin districts. In short, LAF runs the overall system of accommodation according to administrative and political decisions and frameworks but does not build or operate individual units.

With the development of the Refugee Housing Programme, other state agencies entered the field of refugee accommodation, transforming the issue of asylum and refugees into one of urban development and housing provision. For the development of MUFs, the Senate for Urban Development and Berlin's public housing companies plan and build in accordance with the quality and shelter requirements of LAF and predominantly with federal funding. In order to build an MUF, the state of Berlin, or the housing companies directly, use either city-owned land or land 'received' from the Federal State Agency for Real Estate Tasks (Bundesanstalt für Immobilienaufgaben), which holds public and state-owned properties in Berlin. This makes the development of MUFs less costly. Built by the housing companies, the MUFs are leased by LAF to house refugees, and LAF subcontracts private agencies to run them (see next section). The accommodation of refugees, including the rent for housing units, is financed by the federal government. Housing companies charge relatively high rents: in 2022, the net rent in MUFs was €13.50 per square metre, a rate comparable with luxury apartment rentals in Berlin's city centre. Consequently, housing companies can access and develop land cheaply and gain higher revenues (compared to developing regular forms of social housing) because the purchase of land, the construction of asylum accommodation and the housing of refugees through LAF is federally subsidized. This allows for a shorter payback period and quick amortization (half as long as for social housing). When MUFs are turned into 'social housing' or accommodation for other groups, they will already have been refinanced and amortized through the accommodation of refugees. This makes MUFs a profitable solution, both for 'living space' for refugees and later use as 'social housing'.

A careful analysis of the financing structures reveals that the development of Berlin's recent form of accommodation involves a specific financialized accumulation model. The Berlin government uses accommodation to finance its public housing companies – which, in the regime of entrepreneurial

remunicipalization, are forced to accumulate profit and function as commercial enterprises – and it enables new opportunities for profit making by private companies and organizations.

Scandals, frauds and multimillionaires: the private for-profit sector of the refugee accommodation industry

The local governance of accommodation is not limited to municipal authorities; local state and private actors are interwoven to such a degree that it is difficult to tell them apart. Subcontracting and outsourcing of services are enshrined in and shape Berlin's current accommodation regime and RAI, despite – or to a degree because of – recent processes of remunicipalization. The already outlined McKinsey case exemplifies the blurred line between public policy and private sector interests as much as the local–global dynamics relevant to the production and management of accommodation. The diverse private-sector involvements in the RAI also include actors such as architects, planners, construction companies, reception centre operators, security firms and catering companies. Some are specifically local; others act on the national or global scale. A look at some of the contracted companies and payment volumes reveals the complex and often questionable public–private relationships that contribute to the making of RAIs.

With regard to the construction of MUFs, two companies have disproportionately received mandates and share a monopoly, despite EU-wide tenders: Klebl Baulegistik GmbH, a mid-size company located in Bavaria that was mandated to construct 19 out of the 52 MUFs, for which it received over €360 million; and Goldbeck Nordost GmbH, which has built, or is to build, 30 per cent of the MUFs. Goldbeck is one of the most prominent modular construction companies in Germany and the largest underground car park manufacturer in Europe. As general contractors, both companies subcontract other companies for specific services (such as water-supply infrastructure) with limited oversight by public authorities.

As far as operation is concerned, the number of companies has been fluctuating according to the number of accommodation units and the number of refugees to be housed. Between 2013 and 2016, there were over 150 units – 87 of them emergency facilities – operated by more than 50 different companies ([Berlin Senate Department for Health and Social Affairs \[Senatsverwaltung für Gesundheit und Soziales\] SenGS, 2016](#)). At that time, most of the operating contracts went to for-profit companies, many of them without any experience in humanitarian or social care. The biggest players included PeWoBe GmbH, PRISOD GmbH, Gierso GmbH, L.I.T.H.U. GmbH and BeWo GmbH – construction and real estate management companies for which the accommodation market represented a lucrative business. Together, they operated around two thirds

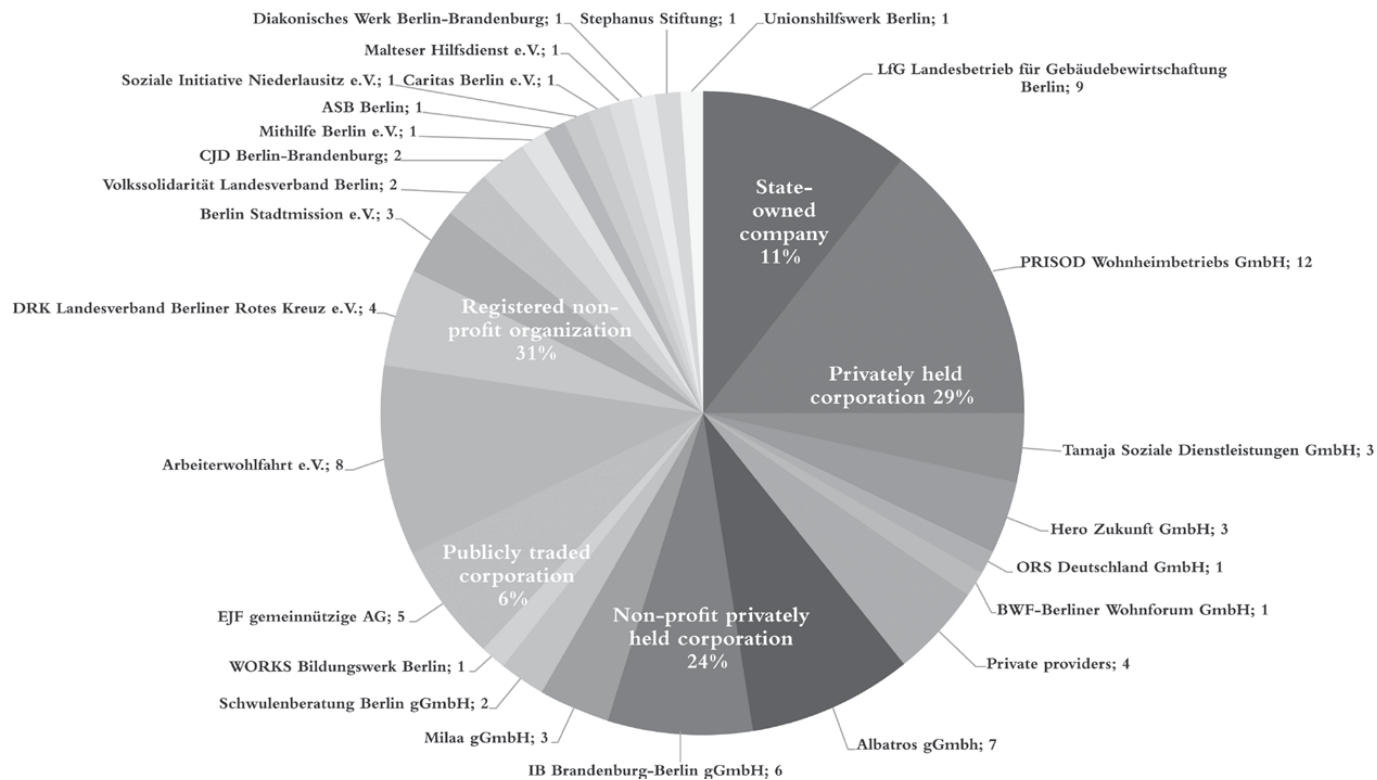
of accommodation facilities. The dominance of these actors would not have been possible without their ties to public and government actors. For example, in 2014 LaGeSo and its head, Franz Allert, were accused of paying GierSo and PeWoBe for services they did not carry out and of awarding large-scale contracts for operation services to both companies without the mandatory calls for tenders. The then director of GierSo is the godson of then LaGeSo head Allert. These operators faced accusations regarding breach of minimum standards, resulting in public scandals including tumultuous and often violent conditions in accommodation blocks.

Since around 2018, the Berlin government has been promoting diversity among actors involved in asylum and accommodation operations. Diversity enhances market competitiveness, flexibility and the diffusion of caring responsibilities among public actors and the market. As contract stipulations between operators and LAF are individually negotiated, conditions between accommodations vary. As of 2020, there were 26 different operators on the market running a total of 84 accommodation units (see [Figure 12.2](#)). Since the height of the refugee reception crisis, the government has focused more on contracting both established welfare organizations and newly founded, mostly Berlin-based organizations and initiatives to operate the units. However, privately held companies and what are called ‘non-profit privately held corporations’ still dominate the market, as illustrated in [Figure 12.2](#).

For the recently developed MUFs, there are 14 operators for 22 shelters. Most are run by private local social work agencies and associations for social and healthcare services based in Berlin. But MUF providers also include European Homecare GmbH, which is the largest private accommodation operator in Germany. European Homecare has frequently been accused of providing unsanitary living conditions, hiring right-wing extremists as security guards and allowing the abuse of refugees by accommodation staff (see [Polat and Müller, 2017](#)). Running three MUF shelters, Hero GmbH is one of the largest providers of refugee accommodation and care services in Europe. Based in Norway, Hero is a listed company that controls almost all asylum facilities in Norway, as well as some in Sweden, and since 2017 Berlin’s LAF is one of its largest customers. Hero is owned by multimillionaire brothers Kristian and Roger Adolfsen. They are among the 70 richest people in Norway, and both are the major shareholders in the Adolfsen Group, a multibillion-dollar revenue-making set of companies that invest in a wide range of sectors (real estate, hotels, welfare services), often on behalf of the public. The Adolfsen brothers have been repeatedly accused of using their labyrinth of subsidiaries and holding companies to funnel money for refugee care into their own pockets ([Balzter, 2016](#)).

Operators hire companies to provide services at accommodation facilities. These services include social work, cleaning, security and catering. Social workers usually work directly for the relevant operator.

Figure 12.2: Actors involved in the operation of accommodation



Note: This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: Author based on 2020 data from LAF

For other services, operators seek contracts with companies on the market. Because contracts between LAF and operators include prospective forms of finance, operators are encouraged to find ways to cut their costs – lowering wage payments for social workers or selecting the lowest-cost service providers, for example. Since these services do not run directly under LAF authority, contract stipulations between operators and providers, including the names of and payments to providers, are non-transparent and difficult to track.

Some 50 different security companies are contracted by operators. For each facility, a contracted company provides one to five security personnel. In 2016 (the latest date for which any information could be found), there were four dominant players on the market: B.O.S.S. Sicherheitsdienste und Service GmbH; ABRA Allgemeine Sicherheits- und Kontrollgesellschaft mbH, Berlin; G&S Gebäude- und Sicherheitservice GmbH; and SGB Sicherheitsgruppe Berlin GmbH. Certain operators prefer certain security companies. For example, PISSOD gave contracts exclusively to BOSS Sicherheitsdienste und Service GmbH. Humanitarian and welfare-centred providers opt for G&S Gebäude- und Sicherheitservice GmbH and Berlin-based SGB Sicherheitsgruppe GmbH, both national players and market leaders in the security field. In the summer of 2021, Berlin's accommodation security made headlines. According to investigations by local media outlets, some private security companies were suspected of being part of criminal networks engaged in fraud. There are said to be at least two known networks – to which around 30 (mostly local) companies from the security industry belonged – that used subcontractors to issue sham invoices to each other, used undeclared work to save taxes and social security contributions and billed more personnel and services than were hired/provided (Bachner, 2021).

For catering services, contract stipulations are equally opaque and hard to track. Catering is only provided in the city's reception centres, where refugees are under a 'benefit-in-kind' regime and have no cooking options. The cost of full board is between €9.60 and €13.00 per person per day. The catering market consists of many small and local companies, some of them with direct ties to centre operators. For example, in 2016 it became public knowledge that the managing director of Gierso GmbH was also the director of Eat Performance GmbH, which at that time catered all Gierso-run accommodation and supplied over 1,000 meals daily. However, one of the largest players since the refugee reception crisis has been Sodexo SCS GmbH, which provides thousands of meals to refugees in Berlin every day. It belongs to the Sodexo Group, a listed French mass catering and facility management company that is one of the world's biggest private employers, is present in over 56 countries, serves 100 million customers every day and generated consolidated sales of €23.8 billion in the fiscal year 2024.

Global–local dynamics and making cities through refugee accommodation industries

Examining some of the state and non-state actors and the bewildering processes of outsourcing associated with Berlin's RAI reveals the economization of accommodation and the often fraudulent practices and conflicts involved in making a profit from housing refugees. It also illustrates the extent to which the constitution of RAIs is related to global processes and actors. Despite a particular local formation of the RAI and the locally specific spatial characteristics of accommodation, such as the MUF, the RAI does not operate in a local vacuum but is embedded in networks and public–private negotiations on various scales. These do not merely unfold locally but are co-constituted through local processes and result in locally specific yet globally connected actor and spatial settings. Thus, analysing the RAI not only shows that refugee accommodation units have become sites and means of localized business opportunities for private *and* public actors alike. It also elucidates that the RAI is implicated in broader economic, development and policy-making processes. Some of the actors, policies and development ambitions do not serve refugee matters exclusively but originate in, or have become integrated and framed within, a larger project of neoliberal urban development. Thus, viewed through the lens of the RAI, the development of refugee accommodation produces 'the local', and it becomes a starting point itself for local (housing and economic) development.

The intention behind the development, construction and operation of the most recent form of accommodation, the MUF, is to provide new and profit-making forms of housing. MUFs are part of long-term planning for new 'social housing' sites and permanent forms of housing for Berlin's marginalized populations. According to different government actors, the development of these new types of accommodation is 'important for strengthening the supply of housing because they ... are later made available to the regular housing market' and 'most importantly, the modular buildings can provide affordable housing for people with low incomes' (SenIAS, 2018). Moreover, Berlin senator for urban development Andreas Geisel stressed that MUFs 'become the nucleus for the long-term development of an area, through which new neighbourhoods and residential areas can emerge' (in Sethmann, 2016, author's translation). Some MUFs are strategically built in areas where the city has long held ambitions to develop (often contentious) housing projects and residential areas, but where only through accommodation (and the legal particularities of the building law in terms of refugee accommodation; see Kreichauf, 2023) is land and housing development made possible.

The development of accommodation, MUFs in particular, blurs the boundaries between marginalized and low-income populations and new migrants and refugees, all of whom are to be housed in these new facilities.

This generates a host of opportunities for private and public actors to profit under a remunicipalized but neoliberal frame of housing provision. MUFs introduce a new substandard to the housing market. They are designed to look like housing and are sold to the public as ‘housing-like’, but in fact they are ‘social institutions and special constructions not comparable to residential housing’ (SenIAS, 2019). They deliberately undermine normative spatial, technical and social standards and features for those who are excluded from, or cannot find housing in, the regular housing market (Mattern, 2018). This new and substandard housing is built to remain. It departs from the temporary nature of refugee accommodation and turns it into a form of urban housing (Dalal, 2020) that may not only replace the development of desperately needed ‘real’ social and affordable housing but could become a fundamental part of housing markets under neoliberal auspices. It aims at the mass processing and sheltering of marginalized populations for the sake of those private and public actors that can profit from it. Thus, MUFs manifest (or shape new) patterns of segregation as most of these new accommodations are placed in socio-economically weak areas with a relatively high rate of unemployment and poverty at the periphery of the city. Consequently, refugee accommodation and industries are not only critical for Berlin’s recent urban development ambitions but may exacerbate social-spatial inequalities and profit-driven urban policies.

Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter goes beyond classic understandings of the refugee camp and accommodation, examining the multiple actors, services and processes that constitute RAIs. The intention is to consider refugee accommodation as a means of economic development and to show that a migration industry perspective can reveal and make sense of the impact of multiple players and processes in the making of refugee accommodation in cities. Utilizing the idea of the accommodation industry facilitates an understanding of the mechanisms and transformations through which accommodation is developed, maintained and governed, as well as placed and integrated into global–local landscapes of economic and urban development – and helps identify who benefits and makes a profit from it. Accommodation infrastructures and industry are connected; they are constantly changing and being reproduced, often not only according to the ‘need’ to provide shelter for increasing numbers of arrivals but because of the changing economic opportunities that result from and emerge out of accommodation provision. For the accommodation industries ‘to work’, actors need infrastructure and the constant production of refugees to bring about new opportunities for revenue making. Without refugees and the legal stipulations that classify and categorize populations as ‘refugees’ who are made to live in special accommodation units, there would be no accommodation infrastructure or industry.

In summary, this chapter makes three important contributions to studies about refugee accommodation and the migration industry and to further research. First, like other works on the migration industry, it reveals the central role of local public actors and agencies. Their ambition to step in to plan and construct accommodation is not (only) a humanitarian project or one of social control; it is about making a profit through accommodating refugees. Their role in the RAI is significant: not only are they the enablers for private enterprise to make a profit but they also intend to create local revenue for their own budgets. Second, it is the manifold economic interests and the variety of profit-making actors that drive accommodation development, sustainment and expansion. These agents act on various scales, thus contributing to the global political economy of refugee regimes and their local(ly produced) variations. Finally, refugee accommodation actively drives urban and housing development in cities. It provides incentives for urban housing and land development: the RAI – like other migration industries – is politically and economically connected to urban development (Conlon and Hiemstra, 2022).

Hence, utilizing the idea of industry reveals the link between accommodation and the city, the (changing) interactions between the economy, state actors and NGOs and between multiple institutionally structured scales and ‘socio-spatial spheres of practice that are constituted in relationship to each other and within various hierarchies of networks of power’ (Caglar and Glick Schiller, 2018: 8). And it supports an understanding of the complex processes of refugee arrival, emplacement and displacement, and housing. The extent to which the RAI shapes and mediates refugee movements, trajectories and livelihoods in and through accommodation, as well as the industries that refugees themselves are involved in, is an area for further research, which, it is hoped, this chapter will inspire.

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Humanitarian Governance as Development: Protracted Refugee Camps as Drivers of Investment and Innovation in Refugee-Hosting Regions

Bram J. Jansen

Introduction

This chapter explores a trend in understanding refugee camps as sites for investment and innovation, building on the status quo or ‘inevitability’ of their long-term duration and the evolution of humanitarian governance. In this trend, particular designs and approaches reinvent short-term refugee assistance to contribute to the more long-term development of the regions in which these camps are located. This is partly the result of the push for more longer-term regional solutions to refugee situations since the 2015 migration crisis, an increased interest in the protracted refugee crisis in the decade before that and the recognition of camps as sites that become inhabited and organized as unique humanitarian urbanisms. The result is a shift in engagement with refugee camps in which an increasingly broad group of actors come to operate, such as private organizations, municipal actors and corporations, reverberating with a ‘local turn’ in refugee camp studies. However, this local turn is in many ways embedded in spatial relations that span donor offices, planners and corporations far away from the sites where camps are maintained and developed. What emerges in camp localities, then, should be understood as the product of the spatial relations and the socio-economic, cultural and political interests that shape them. Following Doreen [Massey \(2005\)](#), we can approach the camp as a particular constellation of social relations instead of ‘thinking of

places as areas with boundaries around’ (Löw and Weidenhaus, 2017: 554). The local, in that regard – and how projections and practices of social and spatial development in and around camps come about – should be seen as ‘particular, embodied instances of larger global processes’ (Smirl, 2015: 10).

This analysis engages with camp design as an organizational practice and locates this in a broader context of ‘innovation’. Innovation has become a magic bullet in/for the humanitarian sector. The past decades have seen an ‘innovation turn’, which led to the ‘rethinking of organizational cultures and behaviours, and to improve response practices within particular sectors of humanitarianism, such as shelter, water, sanitation, energy, or logistics’ (Betts et al, 2016: 166). Similarly, a ‘technocratic turn’ and an increased tech optimism, spurred by start-ups and the private sector and framed in the language of empowerment, add to innovation associated with privatization or the entry of non-conventional actors into camp governance (Menashy and Zakharia, 2020; Rodgers, 2020: 97). Innovation is an organizational discourse applied to camp design. It is rooted in a socio-technical imaginary (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015), in which design can be recognized as a moment where technology and social concern or opportunity merge. Through a focus on these designs, we can learn about the discursive, institutional, socio-political context in which they are produced, the shift they represent in relation to earlier ideas about encampment and, more precisely, how they materialize in space as the product of imagination, planning and design conceived across different spaces and times.

In the first two sections, I present a project that links the City of Amsterdam with Amman and Zaatar camp in Jordan and explore the way in which this engagement fits a discourse of viewing camps as opportunities for development. The third section explores socio-technical (camp) designs as part of spatial relations and is followed by a section on new actors, technologies and the market. The chapter ends with a reflection on how these developments may usher in a shift from governing people to governing space, and the implications of that shift. More specifically, how do such innovation and development discourses align with, or camouflage, externalization policies that aim to prevent onward migration to Europe? This contribution is based on a long-term engagement with protracted refugee camps, their governance and development. I apply an auto-ethnographic approach, revisiting and interpreting specific data and experiences drawn from my participation as external expert in workshops and meetings and as external consultant, as well as from two field visits to Jordan.¹

From the municipal office in Amsterdam to the dreamscape of Zaatar in Jordan

Some years after the start of the Syrian Civil War, I was invited to a workshop organized by the City of Amsterdam about its involvement in

the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. The camp opened in 2012 as a response to the refugee influx from the war in Syria and grew fast to house more than 100,000 refugees in 2013. After a second camp, Azraq, was opened, Zaatari's population decreased to 70,000 individuals in 2015 and 80,000 in 2022 (UNHCR, 2022a). Not long after its opening, descriptions of the camp highlighted how, despite the hardship of the camp environment, its population engaged in all kinds of economic and socio-spatial organization, adding to the image of the camp as a 'city' in the making (Kimmelman, 2014; Dalal, 2015).

The City of Amsterdam became involved in Zaatari in 2014, after a visit by the Dutch Minister of Development, who was persuaded by the then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camp commander Kilian Kleinschmidt – a larger-than-life character, at least in the recollections of some in Amsterdam, who saw him as a visionary – to understand Zaatari as a place with typically urban phenomena rather than a mere humanitarian site (see also Radford, 2015; Gibson, 2016). The basic gist of his vision: why should humanitarian organizations run refugee camps when these places resemble cities with urban problems and also hold urban potential? After a first engagement to donate left-over bicycles from Amsterdam, the relationship with the municipality was formalized under the umbrella of VNG International, the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten), which aimed to support local governments in the Jordanian and Lebanese responses to the Syrian refugee influx.² This collaboration expanded Amsterdam's involvement in rethinking Zaatari.

The planners in Amsterdam envisioned a more durable camp designed to fit various scenarios that the uncertain future of the Syrian Civil War might produce. Rather than maintaining it as a temporary humanitarian settlement and further consolidating its permanent temporariness, or permanent impermanence (Brun, 2015), the camp could be used as a site for development that could spearhead regional development. The idea of designing a refugee camp with this function, and building development strategies for the host region around it, was relatively novel and was met with great enthusiasm, at least among the project staff in Amsterdam. In these workshops and meetings, the energy to jump to the occasion was tangible. Civil servants, and outside experts with a range of expertise in planning, design, urban management, waste and water management and other areas, were eager to join, inspired by the widely publicized plight of Syrian refugees. It offered an opportunity to travel and to apply their skills and knowledge in the humanitarian-development domain and engage with and visit this troubled region.

In the villages close to Zaatari in the Mafraq governorate in Jordan, the Zaatari camp was plugged as an impetus to further development. Donors

and aid groups shared the message with local actors such as village councils and mayors that they could capitalize on the attention and funding for refugees in the wake of the 2015 crisis: ‘the climate is ripe’ – they said in Jordan. In 2018, I visited several offices of the government, the UNHCR and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Mafraq governorate that hosts Zaatari camp. The enthusiasm seemed more pragmatic in these offices than among the neighbouring villages that experienced a spill-over effect from the Zaatari project. The UNHCR, after the visionary had left, saw the involvement and redesign by Amsterdam more as competition than as contribution.

In the town of Sarhan, not far from the Syrian border, a VNG project aimed at greening urban space grown out of the Zaatari engagement was welcomed. It signifies how the camp was seen as a driver for development, although the mayor himself imagined a different intervention. He advocated a more practical form of support for improving waste management in his municipality rather than the emerging social spaces that the City of Amsterdam had in mind. It showed how the investment and enthusiasm among the city planners and landscape designers were primarily driven by their expertise and institutional culture and their imagination rather than by the need on the ground *per se*.

I locate these processes in Amsterdam, Jordan and the space between as part of a trend in which camps are projected as an opportunity. Ideas and design are linked to broader agendas from environmental and sustainable approaches to humanitarianism and camp governance, to the prevention of onward migration and externalization of asylum, and self-reliance strategies and to new technologies supporting these aims, as well as fitting a rhetoric of camps as boosters of development, broadly captured as innovation (Cohen and Van Haer, 2019; Rodgers 2020). The processes in Amsterdam culminated in a set of designs aimed at improving the camp and its embedding in the region. These designs – some of which were in draft shape with rough but significant ideas – were showcased on project websites and discussed during workshops and seminars and tell a story of how a particular group of people, in a particular institutional environment and time, imagined the world and, more specifically, contemporary ideas about displacement. These designs resemble ‘socio-technical imaginaries’, as ‘collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures’ (or of resistance against undesirable ones), and they are also ‘animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology’ (Jasanoff, 2015: 19). They travel between Amsterdam and the Jordanian arid lands, where they are tested against the political and economic realities of the day. This resonates with Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptualization of space as a relation between practised, conceived and lived notions of space. In his spatial triad, he shows how space is produced by

the relations and interaction between planners and everyday users of space. This relational aspect of the production of space in this case spans the offices in Amsterdam, Amman and the daily routines in the camp in Jordan and shows how the ways ‘spaces are perceived, experienced and remembered, and how people place themselves and their objects are shaped and pre-structured by institutions’ (Löw and Weidenhaus, 2017: 557) located both in the planners’ and donors’ offices in the Global North and in the camp location in the South.

This chapter traces some of those designs as part of a programme aimed to co-shape refugee hosting in Jordan. As a locus for assistance, access point or anchor (Zaman, 2018), the camp was posited as a site where thoughtful planning accommodated a variety of future scenarios and its benefits for Jordan as a refugee-hosting country. By assessing this design, its origins, rationale and the strategies employed in realizing it, the socio-technical imaginary comes to be situated in a particular institutional and cultural context.

This context spans the offices of the donors and organizations in the West and the government, NGOs and camps in the East: ‘Unlike mere ideas and fashions, socio-technical imaginaries are collective, durable, capable of being performed; yet they are also temporally situated and culturally particular. Moreover, as captured by the adjective “socio-technical”, these imaginaries are at once products of and instruments of the coproduction of science, technology, and society in modernity’ (Jasanoff, 2015: 19). Technology is not an empty vessel waiting to be imbued with ‘humanitarian meaning’; rather, society and technology engage in a mutually constitutive relationship (Sandvik et al, 2014). Technology shapes society, and in this case, shapes solutions to refugee problems. This mutual constitution then emerges both in the offices of the landscape architects, the meetings with government planners, the brainstorming sessions and working groups on humanitarian innovation and alternative approaches and in the refugee-hosting landscapes where ideas are generated, tested, claimed or negotiated. A space, indeed, as co-created, across time and distance, as a contemporaneous plurality (Massey, 2005). To understand how these designs emerge means addressing both the context of the designers and the context in which the design is imagined. In other words, it is here (Amsterdam) and there (Jordan) and in between where the refugee camp as driver for development is imagined. Moreover, these designs are built on perceptions of local contexts yet are also imagined at some distance from these, in a spatial and social sense. In Lisa Smirl’s take on the space of reconstruction sites, she notes how we should consider these sites not as *tabula rasa*, and what is ‘produced is immediately politicized and used in different ways by different groups and for different ends’ (Smirl, 2015: 9). As such, camp design and development are embedded and produced as a result of spatial relations but are also used and understood in different ways

by different actors. The humanitarian governance that surrounds Zaatari camp as analysed in this chapter skirts a much longer-term development, as it emerged in the wake of the Syrian Civil War but is also related to broader developments and geopolitical concerns pertaining to long-term camps and the refugee–host dynamics that emerge around them.

The camp as opportunity?

In 2017, Amsterdam’s planners and landscape architects presented their ambition to develop an:

integrated spatial planning approach for Al Zaa’tari, and to extend this to the broader Mafraq region, in effect linking immediate relief to long-term development. This would encourage innovation and experimentation of new approaches and models related to humanitarian response, effecting ‘a paradigm shift’ in approaching the crisis as a source of problems into seeing it as an opportunity for developing infrastructure capacities at local level.³

This agenda combines ‘innovative’ approaches to spatial planning, its application to a broader refugee-hosting environment and the inclusion of non-refugee (host) populations and new actors, as well as reverberating with comparable rhetoric from other camp locations that are understood in more opportunistic ways than as a mere burden. From the 2000s onwards, the ‘protracted refugee camp’ was studied as a site of particular problems as well as emerging relations and practices (Loescher et al, 2008). On the one hand, camps were seen as warehouses for people, who were relegated to marginal existence and living ‘bare lives’ in detrimental and dangerous environments, for increasingly long and semi-permanent durations (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 2005; Agier, 2011). On the other, they were simultaneously recognized as unique experiments, where the UNHCR and NGOs took on governmental roles and gradually started to increase developmental measures instead of purely humanitarian or emergency assistance (Slaughter and Crisp, 2008). Together with how refugees made sense of these environments, this gave shape to more complex socio-political-economic entities that developed largely organically rather than as grand policy or by design (Turner, 2011; Jansen, 2018).

The Syrian war was a game changer. Syrian refugees, from a middle-income country, proved a different type of camp dweller from many of the quintessential refugee protagonists in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where most of the protracted refugee camps were located. Practices and discourses about the development potential of refugee interventions that had taken years to emerge in these other areas were recognized almost

instantaneously in the Jordan case, with Zaatari as an example – and spotlighted as such for a next generation of modern refugee camps with a development signature (Dalal, 2015; Betts and Collier, 2017).⁴

Another significant dynamic was proximity to Europe. The refugee flows into the European Union (EU) during the Mediterranean migration crisis in 2015–16 inspired a new global refugee agenda aimed at encouraging regional solutions to refugee crises and discouraging movement into Europe. The EU–Turkey deal of 2016, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Programmes in particular highlighted the ambition to engage more with local refugee-hosting regions, ranging from encouraging ‘out-of-camp solutions’ to ‘hybrid settlements’ with a more long-term and regional development agenda (Mathew, 2021).

This momentum resonated with much ‘older’ protracted refugee contexts, where mitigating measures rather than forward-looking designs and imaginations had coincided with their organic and informal development and embedding in regional socio-economic landscapes (Jansen and de Bruijne, 2020). Alternative ideas about camps as having a positive impact on local economies emerged more coherently among aid groups, academics and, specifically, donors in the course of the 2010s (Enghoff et al, 2010; Betts et al, 2016; Vemeru et al, 2016) and were translated into policy after 2016. In Kenya, for instance, the marrying of development potential with a new form of camp design was piloted in 2016 in the Kalobeyei hybrid settlement, not far from Kakuma refugee camp.

Actors interested in innovating the governing and structure of refugee camps and their potential role in regional development saw ‘the migration crisis as a business opportunity’ (Lethbridge, 2017: 44). The engagement of multilateral development banks and the World Bank is indicative of this (International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2018). ‘Innovation’ became a buzzword in emergencies and inspired new processes, positioning and paradigms – as completely original ways of thinking about humanitarian problems (Scott-Smith, 2016). It is this understanding of innovation, as a new paradigm, that I take as my concern in this chapter – the camp as a driver for development, which leads to new products, processes and positioning, or indeed new policies, practices and approaches.

Grand ideas as innovation: socio-technical design meets post-humanitarian imaginary

The positing of the camp as a driver for development generates a range of possible designs and approaches. Technological innovation generally lags behind ‘authorial imagination by decades or longer’, writes Sheila Jasanoff (2015: 1), and indeed ‘fabulations of social worlds, both utopic and dystopic’,

are seen in ‘authorial imagination’ running ahead of policy and political arrangements (Jasanoff, 2015: 1). Hence, that certain ideas and designs are not (yet) realized is not surprising, yet the conditions under which these imaginations and designs emerge, and what registers they draw, are relevant things to analyse in order to further understand relationally how spaces shape innovation in practice.

An interesting example is how the NGO Movement on the Ground (MOTG) imagines the future of refugee camps. After years of operating in the Greek refugee context, it developed a vision for improving camps, described as a ‘mission’, nurtured at the time when the conditions in and around Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos were super-exposed, dramatic and urgent. Moria embodied what Luna Vives (2017) refers to as a ‘spectacular border’ and, in the case of Lesbos, like others, produced a large pull from European volunteers who organized themselves and whose initiatives morphed into more conventional NGOs in a relatively short time. MOTG’s vision is the ‘Camp to CampUs’ methodology, aimed at transforming refugee hotspots into dignified environments that benefit both refugees and the host community. The discourse aligns with the jargon of innovation, sustainability, self-reliance and an integrated approach, as used in the broader trend introduced earlier: the Camp to CampUs methodology aims at ‘integrating a community enabling ecosystem of services that lead to educational, social, and economic opportunities’, and ‘unlocks the potential of refugees’. The overall aim is to create ‘self-sustaining community environments that encourage active participation and create long-term impact’ (MOTG, nd).

Such NGOs are part of a landscape in which, along with the state and the migrant, a plethora of governmental and NGOs became engaged in the ‘design, policing, administration, and legal and technical operation of the border’ (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010: 978), which exemplifies the broader response to refugee crises in the recent past, which saw new actors arrive on the humanitarian scene with new ideas and strategies.

Other ideas have been around for some time and range from general reflections on the viability of camps as urban economies to more elaborate designs, or starting points to them, for concrete camp solutions or ways to link these to the host environment. An interesting example is the marrying of the camp, or rather its prospect of becoming a ‘displacement economy’, with a Special Economic Zone to allow access to the market and project the refugee population as a labour force simultaneously. A refugee camp rendering of this is the ‘Sustainable Development Zone’ (SDZ), which allows for the opportunities of displacement economies as ‘designated areas with special administrative frameworks, policies, and services designed to produce inclusive economic development’ (Cohen and Van Hear, 2019: 40). These zones would ‘leverage mass displacement for the benefit of the local

population by encouraging entrepreneurship, self-sufficiency, and new investment in jobs and infrastructure' (Kleinschmidt, 2019, in Cohen and Van Hear, 2019: 40).

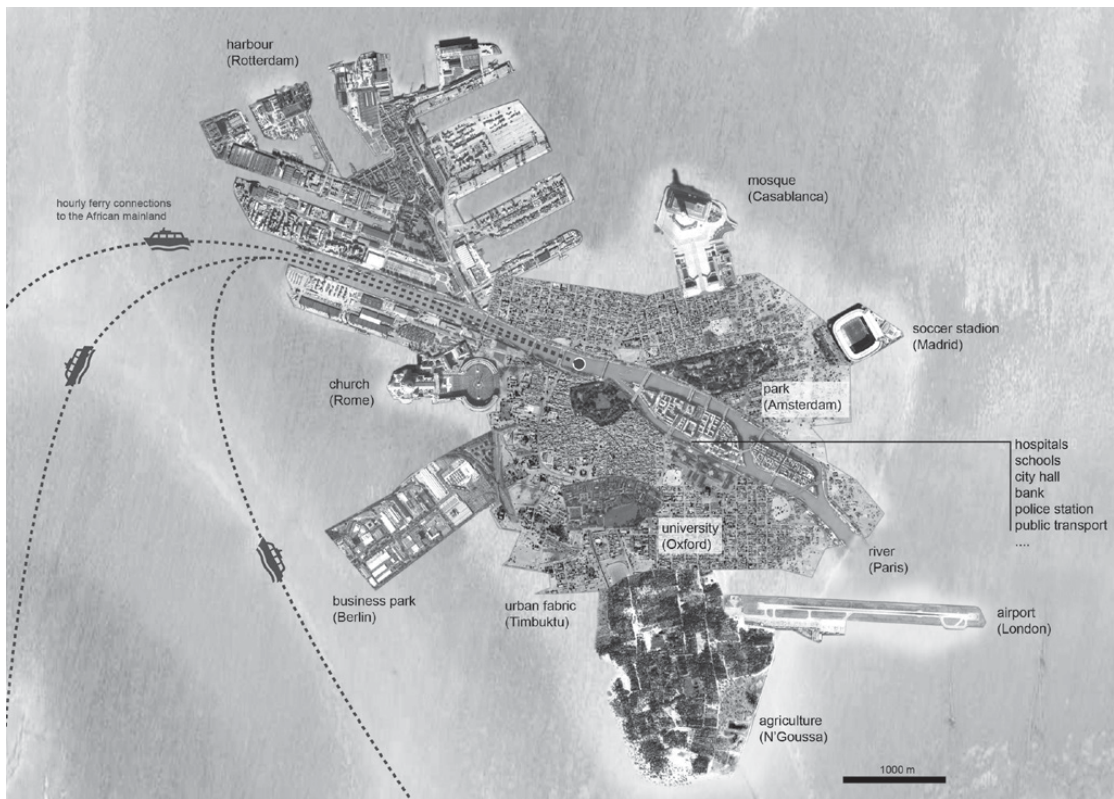
One such initiative called 'Refugee Cities' encourages the idea of SDZs as a way to empower refugees rather than to posit them as 'objects of care'. This stands in contrast to the more modest conventional humanitarian and development providers that tend to 'crowd out innovative solutions', while 'such solutions are needed to bridge the humanitarian–development divide and bring in more stakeholders in an ownership role. These stakeholders must include cities and municipalities, the private sector, and, most importantly, host communities, refugees, and other migrants' (Refugee Cities, 2018: 2).

In Jordan, an SDZ in the Mafraq region was imagined as part of the 'Jordan Compact', an agreement 'turning the refugee crisis into a development opportunity' through designated economic zones and allocating working permits to refugees (Refugee Cities, 2018: 2). Also in Mafraq, the 'Greenfield Cities' project marries migration management and the refugee camp with urban development and envisions refugees as a 'labor and innovative force' and agents of change to work in small and medium enterprises (SME) (referring to the project as an SME incubator).⁵ Specific mention is made of how this could contribute to return migration or encourage refugees to remain in 'haven countries' – countries in the neighbourhood of the refugee-producing conflict zones – rather than migrating onwards and using the dangerous Mediterranean migration routes.

A more radical idea is 'Europe in Africa' (EIA) by TD architects, a city-state founded on an artificial island built on the shallow Tunisian Plateau between Tunisia and Italy. The aim is to provide a place for refugees who want to reach Europe.⁶ Other ideas that are circulating online in various stages of design are Refugee Nation, 'building new refugee cities on vacant lands',⁷ and Charter Cities, aiming for 'city-scale administrative zones' in developing states that a guarantor nation will administer (Doyel, 2021). These ideas propose to allocate (or create) territory for refugees to settle freely, work, study and seek further options for getting into Europe or other areas, when legal opportunities allow.

EIA (see Figure 13.1) is an idea which seeks alternative space between states, built and maintained by European municipalities that each account for a section of the plan: Rome builds a church, London an airfield and Amsterdam a park. It functions as a buffer that is part of the European legislative sphere and the North African socio-cultural environment, where people can stay for some time to live their lives and seek future opportunities. The plan is a clear example of an imagination in which technology and socio-economic planning merge. In this case, imagination indeed runs ahead of policy and political arrangements, and socio-technical design meets post-humanitarian imaginary.

Figure 13.1: Europe in Africa



Note: This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: www.europein africa.com. Reproduced with permission.

The designs sprouting from Amsterdam that I became more acquainted with are tied to the broader development framework for the Zaatari camp, entitled ‘Developing Zaatari: urban planning in a Syrian Refugee camp, Jordan, developed by as a tool to consider different development opportunities for the camp and its region (City of Amsterdam and VNG International 2016). One plan is called the Wadi Park. It bridges the camp and the host community with a shaded and green leisure area and a storm-water catchment located in a flood area (Lodewijk Baljon Landscape Architects and Wareco ingenieurs, 2018). Here, the social and the technical come together, as the function of water management in the arid region is merged to create spaces where people can meet and interact. Another design is called the Health Loop, a pedestrian route around the camp shaded by trees to ease walking or strolling that also functions as a storm-water barrier. The park and loop are long-term inventions for a camp that, in the eyes of many, had become an urban site yet was not planned as one. The designs themselves are technical in their elaboration on soil types and vegetation, and rich in graphics, drawings and calculations, but they also come with a particular perspective of what the camp might become in more socio-economic terms. In an earlier proposal, designs were made for a ‘Central Park’ in conjunction with storm-water planning and catchment (City of Amsterdam and VNG International, 2017). Other analyses and assessments aimed at exploring a range of issues such as opportunities for ‘water management and irrigation’ near the camp (Gijsbertsen et al, 2017).

On the ground, these projects ran into considerable disputes with vested humanitarian and political interests and powerholders, including UNHCR. As a result, the planning of Wadi Park and the Health Loop has not materialized (yet), citing lack of funding, the end of VNG and Amsterdam’s direct engagement and a shift in priorities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the design itself, and the significance it has for understanding thought and rationale about innovative approaches, is not dead and may still impact on camp governance and regional development in myriad ways, connections and influences. These unfulfilled spatial designs as ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey, 2005) may influence other geographies of planning and design: some of the projects for green public spaces designed for the camp have been implemented in neighbouring villages, such as in the town of Sarhan. It is for this reason that non-materialized planning and design harbour ideas that are alive and have meaning.

Ways around the humanitarian–state nexus? New actors, new technologies and the market

Ideas for camp innovation include a more prominent role for non-conventional actors that claim a stake in camp governance and, in design terms, propose an alternative to the ubiquitous humanitarian–state nexus that

drives encampments. In this regard, it is relevant to look at the private sector. Of course, the private sector has in many ways played a role in humanitarian aid as contractors and suppliers (Weiss, 2013; Scott-Smith, 2020). Alexander Betts and colleagues (2016) distinguish three waves of private sector engagement: (1) philanthropy and corporate social responsibility; (2) core business and innovation; and (3) as part of a multilevel ecosystem. This multilevel ecosystem is of interest in the trend that I am exploring. It is where private and non-conventional actors supply and also (co)design and (co)govern refugee camps and their embedding in host regions.

The way the municipal planners of the City of Amsterdam employed companies and parastatals such as the Amsterdam water company and landscape architecture firms in their designs and implementation in Zaatari is a good example. In Zaatari, the trade-off, or ‘humanitarian bargain’ with the state to maintain a refugee camp in the first place, concerned the possible pollution of a subterranean aquifer supplying water to the Mafraq governorate. The trade-off was an elaborate water system with separate supply and sewerage systems and a water treatment plant on-site, co-developed by the water company of Amsterdam.⁸ The rationale behind this exceeded the immediate needs of a temporary camp, or at least was negotiated as such, with projections that this particular infrastructure could serve different future scenarios such as an irrigated site for agriculture, a facility like a university campus, business park or an extension of the city once the camp closed, as also detailed in the planning document (City of Amsterdam and VNG International, 2016).

In a similar vein, new technologies merged with other approaches that were introduced in Zaatari. In 2017, a solar park funded by the German Development Bank was the largest ever built in a refugee camp – or, rather, adjacent to it. It is connected to the national electricity grid, and surplus energy flows back into that grid, which ‘help[s] Jordan reach its renewable energy goals’ (Hashem, 2017). Powering refugee camps and linking this to sustainable regional development opportunities and the climate change agenda has resonated in many places in the past decade but has seen considerable obstacles in implementation. Reliable power in refugee camps is beneficial for business opportunities, improved education and innovation at large. However, humanitarian organizations’ short-term planning strategies based on short-term funding cycles and the unpredictability of the refugee situation ‘inhibits the implementation of long-term strategies for technology introduction such as solar panels and windmills, which are [only] economically beneficial in the long term’ (Neves et al, 2021: 11). As a result, these innovations are not driven by humanitarian actors per se, nor by states who are reluctant to host camps. Private and non-conventional actors may spearhead these developments instead but need a vision, or indeed the imagination, to do so, which may originate in geographies, disciplines and

fields of practice that are distant from the humanitarian field and bring in capital and ideas that are less embedded in humanitarian institutional cultures and path dependencies. In other words, how the spatial development of camps and their surroundings is negotiated and how alternative perspectives emerge are the result of the discussions, workshops and interactions involving a variety of concerned governmental and non-governmental, private and multilateral and individual actors in various localities simultaneously. However, reflecting [Smirl \(2015\)](#) as mentioned earlier, these dynamics, both as process and product, are politicized and understood and used differently by different actors who struggle with the limitations, institutional histories and technological and funding opportunities simultaneously.

Humanitarian and state actors have shown reluctance to engage with the private sector due to different working modalities and motivations ([Scott-Smith, 2016](#); [Neves et al, 2021](#)). From this perspective, the humanitarian sector is seen as blocking innovation and retreating into the language of humanitarian principles and imagined exceptionalism to guard against the entry of ‘outside’ actors, including diaspora and faith-based groups and worker-organized collectives ([Sezgin and Dijkzeul, 2016](#)). Similarly, Tahir Zaman discusses the humanitarian system as an oligopoly where ‘high financial, cultural and regulatory barriers to entry to the formal humanitarian market have inhibited those on the outside from developing constructive and meaningful engagement other than on terms dictated by those from within’ ([Zaman, 2018](#): 4).

Similar experiences were voiced by the people in Amsterdam who found that cooperation with the conventional humanitarian players in and around Zaatari was not straightforward. Indeed, according to UNHCR Jordan in 2018, Amsterdam’s designs were relevant insofar as they would come with funding, but, otherwise, the process of co-creating the camp as a durable space was seen as a troublesome interference on UN turf.⁹ This shows how conventional humanitarian governance actors may feel bypassed or critiqued through grand ideas for camp solutions and want to preserve their say and role as gatekeepers for the eventual implementation of projects. The shift into a multilevel ecosystem of humanitarian governance challenges this role.

By their drive to engage with camp design, non-conventional actors challenge the exceptionalism of humanitarian actors as the primary interlocutors with the state in camp issues. The involvement of these new actors, and private actors in particular, can be seen as finding ways around state-centric approaches to close the ‘relief-to-development’ gap, in which problems of coordination, and lack of funds and commitment, are not dependent on the relation between humanitarian and state actors ([Betts et al, 2017](#)). Instead, the role of private actors chimes more with a market rationale. For example, the transition from in-kind assistance to cash or voucher-based relief goes hand in hand with market opportunities for regional actors and

host communities. In Zaatari, the UNHCR has shifted to cash assistance, as it is the ‘most dignified and empowering way of delivering assistance and fostering local markets’ (UNHCR, 2022b: 3). This approach is directly related to other domains of the innovation agenda, for instance the use of blockchain technology and biometric registration by cardless iris scanning (UNHCR, 2021).

In his reflection on a TedX event in Kakuma camp, Hanno Brankamp writes that this shows ‘the degree to which humanitarian organizations like the UNHCR have now wholeheartedly embraced neoliberalism’s most cynical narratives’. He argues that ‘rebranding refugees as entrepreneurs and camps as places of opportunity shows the boundless cynicism of neoliberal humanitarianism’ (Brankamp, 2018), where displaced persons are encouraged to be ‘self-governing’ and expected to ‘refashion themselves as resilient, entrepreneurial subjects’ (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015). It is debatable whether this is indeed a wholehearted embrace by the UNHCR or rather a make-do with the inevitability and economic development of protracted refugee camp settings. What it does show, however, is that, in the search to build more sustainable and longer-term refugee camps, private and non-conventional actors have a more direct approach to the market and its opportunities for innovation than more classic humanitarian camp models have shown in the past. Remarkable in this regard is how ‘refugees are listed in the “Natural Resources” section of the document outlining the rationale of the KISEDIP [Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan] Phase One document (UNHCR, 2018), alongside the county’s oil reserves and solar potential’ (Rodgers, 2020: 94).

Indicative of this market imperative are the rhetoric and language employed in the Amsterdam engagement with Zaatari. The core phrase is ‘end value’, suggesting that investment in high-quality infrastructure for the camp, rather than makeshift and low-quality solutions, pays off in the end given the ‘default development’ of temporary camps seen elsewhere (City of Amsterdam and VNG International, 2016). The argument is quite convincing:

What will Zaatari camp contribute to the Kingdom of Jordan if, one day, it acquires a different purpose or gains a permanent status as an urban settlement? What will its end value be in economic, ecological, technical and social respects?

This end value is mainly determined by the quality and functionality of the spatial layout that is taking form today ... If we opt for a spacious and adaptable layout, with a modern main infrastructure of roads, cables and pipelines, then a sustainable site may emerge that Jordan can eventually use for a variety of purposes, such as for high-tech agriculture or industries, a science campus, logistics centre, village or town, military compound, and so on.

The goal is to prevent the ‘default development’ from occurring in Zaatari – *meaning* that the camp in its current form will ‘frustrate every form of development, as happened earlier with the Palestinian camps’.

The challenge is therefore to apply a spatial strategy that will generate a maximum end value, in spatial, economic, ecological, technical and social respects. (*City of Amsterdam and VNG International, 2016: 54*)

Convincing and logical as this may sound, it also raises important questions about the nature, purpose and aim of refugee camps, and how varying understandings of this may affect different outcomes in terms of spatial planning and its impacts on the position and lives of refugees and citizens.

Reflection: from assisting people to governing space?

One of the enthusiasms among the Amsterdam staff working on Zaatari was the aim of contributing to making the temporary camp into a permanent and durable structure, legitimizing and allowing a more durable intervention strategy. With this, a core approach to encampment changed from maintaining the temporary protection of *people* to building a strategic *infrastructure*. These efforts to consolidate the camp can be seen as the application of a de facto ‘fourth durable solution’ in UNHCR speak, adding to the original three of voluntary repatriation, local integration and third-country resettlement.

Normalizing and embracing the ‘camp model’ branded as development may, however, legitimize a further, more permanent incarceration of refugees (*Brankamp, 2022*). Or, perhaps more precisely, innovations intended to make camps drivers of development will fit the shift from refugee care to migration management and the emergence of a ‘humanitarian border’ (*Williams, 2015*). What is posited as more humane, sustainable, durable and integrated camps or settlements are also part of more elaborate border zones. Camp innovation may then spearhead a move away from governing people to governing space, shifting the priority from refugee protection based on individual vulnerabilities to developmental and infrastructural planning for the common good, refugees included – resulting in a potential abandonment of a humanitarian imperative or refugee-centred perspective (*Sandvik et al, 2014*).

The camp as a humanitarian space then seems to lose out vis-à-vis an economic or political interest, sustained by design and approaches that see camps as drivers of development – a socio-technical impetus that reframes refugee solutions as spatial development. Some participants during the workshops in Amsterdam suggested that, through discourses of sustainability, innovation and self-reliance, the dislocation of people is only further cemented – albeit in more elaborate camps. Similar critique

was voiced against MOTG on Lesbos and has been more broadly discussed by others, for instance by focusing on ‘humanitarian complicity’ in the (implicit) maintaining of camps as a solution to refugee crises (Chkam, 2016). Aid groups, perhaps ‘unknowingly’, or as a result of enthusiasm, legitimize states’ negligence or anti-migration strategies and can undertake a consolidation of ‘humanitarian needs’ for political aims (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015), or indeed a ‘carceral humanitarianism’ (Brankamp, 2022). This fits earlier critiques of encampment and the ‘camp model’ as solutions to refugee crises (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 2005; Agier, 2011; Verdirame and Pobjoy, 2013; Brankamp, 2022) – only now it comes in the language of innovation.

Crucially, one should ask whose development the camp is triggering? The innovation turn is ‘a distinctive approach to aid, which combines an optimistic faith in the possibilities of technology with a commitment to the expansion of markets’ (Scott-Smith, 2016: 2229). As drawn from the Kenyan case, ‘[t]he irony is that, while both refugees and pastoralists are being framed as attractive new frontiers for global capital, it is likely that many will be excluded from the benefits of this arrangement’ (Rodgers, 2020: 91).

The enthusiasm of the people of the City of Amsterdam and its semi-private partners does not reflect a market expansion agenda. However, they do exert some form of what Tom Scott-Smith (2016) refers to as a ‘techno-utopian fervour’ in which many developments seem to be driven by what is possible rather than what is needed (Read et al, 2016). I recognize this principle in some of the workshops and seminars I joined where private and ‘new’ actors sought access to the humanitarian domain. One of those workshops was organized by the Dutch Coalition for Humanitarian Innovation (DCHi) in The Hague, and, during the session, corporations from the Rotterdam Port environment explored options to reinvent their business model to build a humanitarian hub in the event of the end of the fossil fuel trade and transfer.¹⁰ In similar sessions, and in a broader sense, corporate interests in the humanitarian field cause solutions to humanitarian crises to be reinvented as development or economic modalities and opportunities. Applied to camps, it is reasonable to suggest that this indeed consolidates them, but as humanitarian borders and a form of migration management rather than as an attempt to find durable solutions for displaced populations. On a more theoretical level, the techno-utopian fervour that drives a particular spatial turn, in the shape of the camp as a development opportunity, should be understood as emblematic of the camp as a relational space. As Raymond Apthorpe notes in his cultural understanding of development as ‘Aidland’: ‘[T]hings over there are not as they are, but as we are’ (2011: 200) or, in Smirl’s rendering, ‘building the other, constructing ourselves’ (2008). Similarly, processes designed for ‘the region’ may in effect have another centre in mind that not only shapes development but that it is also ultimately attentive to.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how refugee camps become staging boards for developmental programming, either targeted as sites themselves or as the impetus for more regional development approaches. The rhetoric of camps as drivers of development accelerated in the 2010s as a result of the Syrian Civil War and the Mediterranean refugee crisis in 2015. These events pushed for imaginations of ways to externalize asylum and mitigate onward migration to Europe from distant conflict regions. This ushered in a more general rethinking of socio-economic development in protracted refugee contexts elsewhere – including a better understanding of the effects of protracted refugee camps on host communities. The result is a different language and design of refugee interventions, allowing for a greater role for non-conventional and private actors in the humanitarian field and focusing less on refugees and their legal-humanitarian concerns or plights. Instead, design focuses on spatial infrastructure and how this may enable social and economic interaction and settlement.

Socio-technical designs that approach refugee camps as drivers for development usher in a shift from governing a specific category of people – refugees – to governing space, which implies a focus on infrastructural and spatial development – including that of the host community – and targets multiple fields simultaneously: the environment, development and migration management. This shows how camps and thinking about camps have evolved over time, in a geopolitical context that shows a lack of any solution to encampment leading to protracted camps with no end in sight, and an increasing urge to draw refugee protection into migration management.

Imaginations of alternative designs for refugee camps come from a wide range of actors and affect the camp as they touch down on Jordanian and other soil, where they are altered, contested, reimagined and fed back to the offices and environments that they came from. The production of camp space, as the culmination of practices and design, is the outcome of social relations that span the globe, linking actors in the Netherlands, Jordan and elsewhere, but also relating different institutional, governmental and corporate cultures, aims and aspirations. This results in opportunities and new visions but also tensions and obstacles between these different institutional and operational spheres that compete and negotiate over the meaning and purpose of camps, now and in future projections. Imagination that runs ahead of political or technological practice, in that sense, is a still underexplored aspect of camps as relational spaces.

Notes

¹ Workshops included various meetings on Amsterdam's Zaatari project, seminars with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the DCHi and the end evaluation of the VNG Logorep Programme in 2018.

- ² The Local Government Resilience Programme for the Middle East and North Africa (LOGOReP) was implemented by VNG International in Jordan (with the City of Amsterdam) and Lebanon (with the City of the Hague) between 2015 and 2018. Its aim was to support local government resilience in the wake of the large scale displacement of Syrian refugees in the region.
- ³ From Zaatari workshop book (2016).
- ⁴ See, for instance, the short video series ‘A day in the life: Za’atari’, Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4OIVW0waEo>; see also the Refugee Republic website about Domiz refugee camp in northern Iraq: <https://refugeerepublic.submarinechannel.com/>.
- ⁵ See <https://www.greenfieldcities.org/> [Assessed: 16 June 2025].
- ⁶ See <https://www.europeinafrica.com/> [Assessed: 16 June 2025].
- ⁷ See <https://refugeenation.org/>; and a commentary <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/aug/04/refugee-nation-migration-jason-buzi> [Assessed: 16 June 2025]
- ⁸ Based on interviews with the refugee department in Amman, and Waternet in Amsterdam, 2018.
- ⁹ Interview with a senior technical officer, UNHCR Jordan, 2018.
- ¹⁰ Meeting on ‘Safe, secure and resilient food supply’, 18 April 2016, The Hague.

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Providing Hospitality to Asylum Seekers: Exploring the Tension between Tourism and Refugee Accommodation in Austria's Migration System Through Visual Research

Nina Valerie Kolowratnik and Johannes Pointl

Introduction

Austria stands out among European countries for its widespread practice of housing asylum seekers in former tourism establishments,¹ a policy that has been in place since 1955. This approach reflects a broader national strategy that treats the accommodation of people fleeing conflict or persecution as a temporary, short-term issue. The use of hotels, guesthouses and other tourism-related facilities has become a practical solution to house asylum seekers, especially during periods of increased arrivals. However, the smooth transition from tourism facilities to refugee housing is complicated by the stark contrast between two fundamentally different realities: the voluntary escape from daily life sought by tourists, and the urgent need for stability and safety by migrants who have been forced to flee.

Historically, the practice of accommodating asylum seekers in tourism establishments dates back to the post-Second World War era, as Austria dealt with an influx of refugees, including those displaced by the Cold War and the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s. Over the years, former tourism establishments have been repurposed due to their large capacity, existing infrastructure and cost effectiveness, especially during off-peak tourist seasons. While

this system provides quick and efficient housing, this chapter shows that its temporary nature and the lack of guidelines for the housing of asylum seekers gives rise to a number of challenges related to the provision of a safe environment that respects personal space and allows for the promotion of a sense of arrival. It also prevents the reclamation of the state of living in a context of permanent mobility, the facilitation of community building and participation in society, as well as the possibility to regain agency and lead a self-determined life.

By law, proprietors are responsible for operating accommodations that care for vulnerable asylum seekers with specific needs. However, there are no minimum standards for such housing, and the guidelines that provincial governments and proprietors must follow are vague. The process of converting tourism establishments into refugee accommodations does not require proprietors to be trained in housing or caring for asylum seekers, nor do they need to employ qualified staff. As a result, it is often left to operators to determine whether the space provides not just physical but also psychological refuge and whether it allows refugees to reconnect with the idea of living. This *laissez-faire* approach in Austrian local governance creates a paradox: insufficient oversight of weak legal guidelines results in conditions ill-suited for asylum seekers, while the legal gap is exploited by proprietors, who impose extra-legal rules to meet their own organizational and financial interests. Despite these challenges, the practice persists as part of a national asylum policy focused more on immediate accommodation than long-term integration strategies.

This decision by the Austrian authorities to make use of a spatial resource that has been designed for tourists with fundamentally different needs, and therefore is not well suited to accommodating asylum seekers, represents, as this chapter will show, a practical example of the concept of the ‘total institution’ coined by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1961). In Austria, it is not only the asylum accommodation itself that exhibits the characteristics of a total institution, being distinctly isolated from the rest of society; the entire accommodation system functions as a total institution, as it relies on decentralization of units and their placement in secluded locations. Acknowledging the continuity and pervasiveness of the Austrian refugee camp, both as physical and administrative complexes constructed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, we emphasize the need to explore the roles of various actors and lived realities of asylum seekers, thereby resisting normalization of the state of exception and its effects (Katz et al, 2019). The reason why it is even thinkable to use tourism establishments as asylum-seeker accommodation might become more evident if we assume that both spaces are inhabited only temporarily and are, to different degrees, the product of the seemingly inescapable ‘biopolitical machine’ of modernity that has been shaping the discourse on camp studies (Agamben, 2002). In their

investigation on ‘carceral landscapes of leisure’, which incorporates tourism establishments into the discourse on camps, Claudio Minca and Chin-Ee Ong expand on Giorgio Agamben’s speculation on custody and care by incorporating the functions of protection and control into the ‘camp’ as spatial formation (Minca and Ong, 2016). While we highlight in this chapter that camp-like constructions are not universally deployable technologies and follow a different logic according to their specific contexts and their effects on the everyday life of camp residents (Katz et al, 2018), we also shed light on the perpetual application of the state of exception by (local) government entities in managing Austrian asylum-seeker accommodation. In this context, the Austrian asylum system made use of the existing processes of managing (leisure) time of guests in tourism facilities and filled structural vacancies in the tourism sector by handing over the responsibility of accommodating and controlling asylum seekers to the private sector. It is important to note that within this form of accommodation management in tourism infrastructure, where facilities oscillate between hospitality towards and control of fluctuating bodies, individuals maintain a certain degree of agency by incessantly striving for a condition of ‘living’, resisting and overcoming the problematic spatial and organizational regime that this ‘total institution’ entails (Goffman, 1961).

This chapter first sheds light on the political, economic and spatial planning reasons for the extensive use of former tourism facilities as accommodation for asylum seekers and traces the relationship between these and the movement of refugees to and through Austria in the second half of the 20th century, which was accompanied by a tightening of local asylum policies. It will then focus on an analysis of the laws and guidelines that govern both the accommodation itself and the care provided to refugees in Austria and that allow private actors to play a significant role in this process. Next it discusses the flexible governance of Austria’s asylum system, which allows units to switch back and forth between being tourism facilities and asylum accommodation, leaving the same proprietors and personnel to care for both groups. Flexibility is further thematized when we look at the practice of downgrading building regulations for accommodation intended for asylum seekers, leading to faster emergency responses yet also carrying the risk of ‘cementing’ a low building quality inadequate for permanent housing, as well as the gradual introduction of a prison-like atmosphere into asylum accommodation, the latter being far removed from an organized arrival process that would allow asylum seekers to exercise their right to adequate housing (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 1991). Based on the findings of research and mapping work, the chapter concludes with a call for a long-term spatial solution and legal frameworks that would guarantee basic requirements for

‘living’ such as self-determination, retreat and the possibility of creating a personal atmosphere.

The research and mappings presented in this chapter is part of ‘Fluchtraum Österreich’, a teaching and research project led by the authors at the Faculty of Architecture at Vienna University of Technology (TU Wien), between 2015 and 2018. In three architecture master's courses and a subsequent year of research conducted by the authors and grant-funded by TU Wien, a total of three weeks of fieldwork were carried out in asylum accommodation in the Austrian provinces of Styria, Carinthia, Tyrol and Vienna, including 78 interviews with refugees, private proprietors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government representatives, as well as mapping workshops in asylum accommodation. The research further builds on the publicly available legal documents and guidelines on which asylum accommodation in Austria is based, and a body of academic literature on asylum in Austria, hospitality and the politics of ‘closed’ institutions. The results of the research project were made publicly available through a series of exhibitions (including some mounted inside asylum accommodation), a symposium, a guest-edited volume of the journal *asyl aktuell* (Kolowratnik and Pointl, 2015) and numerous articles.²

To expose and document the inadequate state of refugee accommodation, ‘Fluchtraum Österreich’ employed spatial mapping techniques as its primary methodology. In this context, mapping is to be understood as an activist tool that, as noted by James Corner (1999), Edward Tufte (2001) and Stan Allen (2009), has the capacity to reveal otherwise invisible or hidden aspects of spatial, social, economic and temporal relationships. The research project sought to find innovative ways to visualize the complex relationships embedded within the Austrian asylum system, aiming to confront the spatial and political realities it creates. We argue that a new form of spatial representation of these conditions has the potential to not only critically analyse and communicate them to both academic and non-academic audiences but also to open the door to a new, previously unimagined reality – a projective reality that can inspire and provide a much-needed research foundation for spatial practitioners who wish to engage with the fields of asylum and hospitality. By combining official, top-down data – such as aerial photography, occupancy statistics and legal boundaries – with interview-based, bottom-up information and on-the-ground observations, we were able to uncover existing hierarchies and power structures while balancing them with the local conditions encountered. Our ongoing collaboration with asylum seekers in creating the mappings went beyond simply portraying refugees as passive cartographic subjects. It allowed them to become active agents in shaping the development of the mappings, thereby giving them a voice in the process. The mappings

presented in this chapter can therefore be seen as socio-spatial arguments that not only critique the local conditions in which asylum seekers are housed but also question whether the widespread use of tourism facilities is a suitable method for providing them with adequate accommodation and a conducive living environment.

The reasons for the continued use of tourist accommodation as a place of refuge since the 1950s can be found in Austria's administrative, economic and spatial development. The country's tourism industry is characterized by a multitude of small-scale facilities that have become economically unviable. Together with the longstanding practice of outsourcing accommodation and care to private individuals and organizations, which reached other European countries more recently (Darling, 2016), the availability of underused or even empty tourist facilities in often remote areas allowed for a strategic dispersal of asylum seekers across all of Austria.

Hospitality and control as historical continuity

Ever since the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the resulting flight of around 170,000 Hungarians to Austria (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017), there have been periods during which up to 95 per cent of asylum seekers in Austria have been accommodated in tourist establishments (Bendl, 2014: 7). According to the political scientist Raimund Pehm (2016), this persistent use of tourist accommodation is a consequence of the oversupply of low-standard and unclassified tourist facilities in Austria, as well as of the strategic advantages that the small-scale structure of the tourism industry provides for an asylum system that is based on spatial decentralization and fragmentation, as well as the outsourcing of accommodation and care.

As a neutral country during the Cold War period, Austria saw itself as a transit zone for refugees, who were fleeing as a result of the conflict between East and West, up to the 1990s. The crisis in Hungary was followed, in 1968, by the 'Prague Spring' and the temporary admission of around 200,000 refugees (UNHCR, 2017) and, in 1981, by the imposition of martial law in Poland, as a result of which between 120,000 and 150,000 people sought refuge in Austria. While in 1956 accommodation was provided in the larger, state-organized facilities that were used to receive displaced persons after the Second World War and in provisional emergency camps, as well as in pensions (B&Bs), hotels, guesthouses and private accommodation, in 1968 and 1981 refugees were 'primarily housed in private accommodation such as hotels and private homes' (Bendl, 2014: 7).

The predominant use of private accommodation for asylum seekers has continued up until today. During the 1990s, Austria shifted from being a transit to a target country for refugees (*asylkoordination österreich*, 2009: 31),

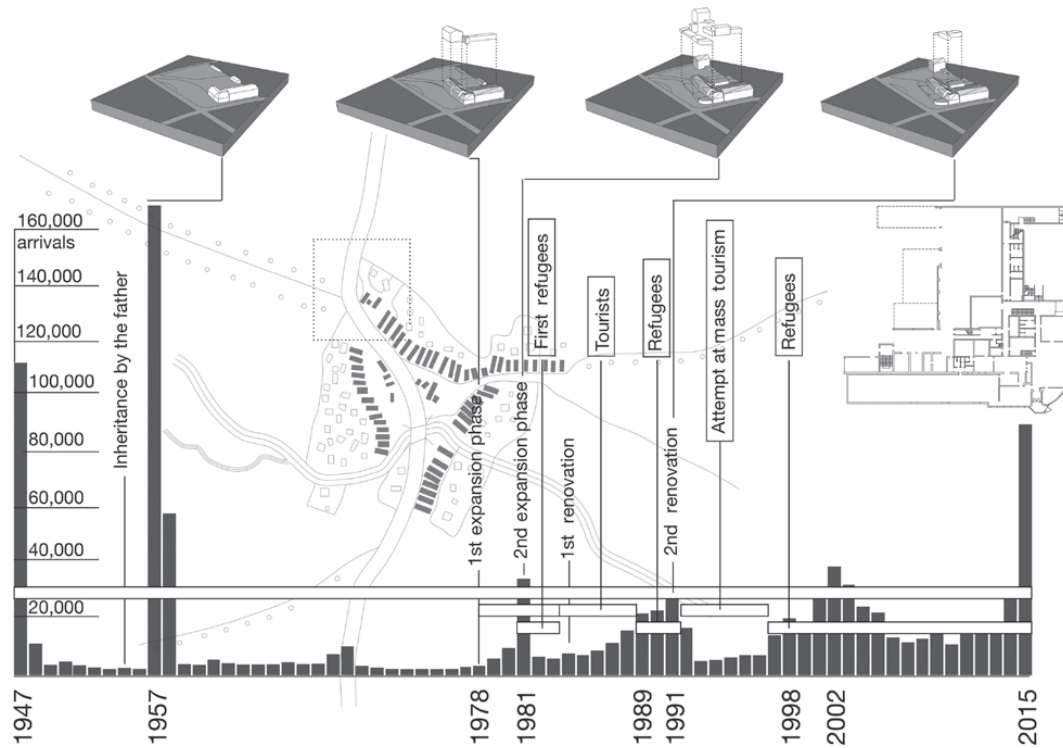
owing to the fact that traditional countries of immigration such as the US began to introduce entry restrictions.³ At the same time, Austria started to tighten its previously relaxed asylum laws and – against the background of its aim of distributing asylum seekers equally across its nine provinces⁴ – introduced the first laws governing the care of refugees. After the war in Bosnia, which resulted in 90,000 refugees, the most recent major movement of refugees occurred in 2015, when around 89,000 people arrived in Austria, principally from Afghanistan and Syria.⁵

This history of using Austria's tourist infrastructure as accommodation for asylum seekers, which has continued unbroken since 1956, is exemplified by a hotel in Central Burgenland, just 8 km from the Hungarian border. [Figure 14.1](#) illustrates the relationship between large-scale movements of refugees to Austria (vertical lines represent the number of refugee arrivals per year) and the common Austrian practice of investing incrementally in the built infrastructure of a hospitality facility (horizontal lines represent the duration of construction work that was necessary to accommodate either tourists or asylum seekers). The 'ensemble' of six separate building elements that make up the hotel and can be recognized in [Figure 14.2](#) was gradually expanded from the 1950s onwards in preparation for mass tourism that in the event, under the baleful shadow of the Iron Curtain, never took off. As a result of building measures financed by cheap credit – such as a never opened observation tower offering views across the Pannonian Plain towards the former Soviet Union – and the resulting financial distress that was compounded by a lack of tourists, the heirs to the hotel's original owner were eventually induced to accommodate asylum seekers. The first of them moved in after rebuilding work in the 1980s, and, following a period of regular alternation between tourists and refugees, the hotel has been exclusively housing refugees since 1998.⁶

Strategic decentralization

As a result of the continuing challenge presented by refugees fleeing from war zones in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, asylum seekers have replaced tourists, particularly in infrastructurally weak parts of Austria far away from urban centres. The small-scale structure of the Austrian tourist industry, a result of its alpine topography, represents a prerequisite for the possibility of spreading asylum seekers across the country and accommodating them for the most part in units of between 20 and 80 people. The highly dispersed and decentralized nature of the tourism infrastructure has been exploited by Austria's asylum system and its spatial strategy ever since accommodation was organized for refugees from former Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War. [Pehm \(2016\)](#) explains Austria's

Figure 14.1: The relationship between refugee movement and investment in tourism infrastructure in Austria, as exemplified by an inn in the Austrian province of Burgenland next to the Hungarian border



Note: This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: Illustration by Johannes Puchleitner, Fluchtraum Österreich Master Studio, Faculty of Architecture, TU Wien. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 14.2: The inn in Horitschon, an ensemble of buildings that has grown over a period of 60 years



Source: Photograph by Johannes Puchleitner, *Fluchtraum Österreich* Master Studio, Faculty of Architecture, TU Wien. Reproduced with permission.

method of distributing new arrivals among small-scale tourist and private accommodation as an initial attempt to prevent the emergence of exiled political resistance movements.⁷

Austria's approach to strategic decentralization can thus be read as a form of 'organized disintegration' where not only the accommodation itself becomes a 'new total institution', that is, a segregating and institutionalized 'closed regime' according to [Ivana Acocella and Margherita Turchi \(2020: 99\)](#), but the location of the vast majority of accommodation facilities and their distance from urban centres further contribute to the exclusion of asylum seekers from society and from even getting in touch with each other.

The social educator Vicki [Täubig \(2009: 56\)](#) describes organized disintegration as follows:

Organized means the establishment of certain frameworks – or, better, structures – for 'managing' the bureaucratic categories of asylum seeker and 'tolerated person' ... The legal rules for asylum seekers and 'tolerated persons' encourage both structural and cultural disintegration. Communal accommodation and a ban on employment imply segregation from the structures that offer the opportunity to integrate.

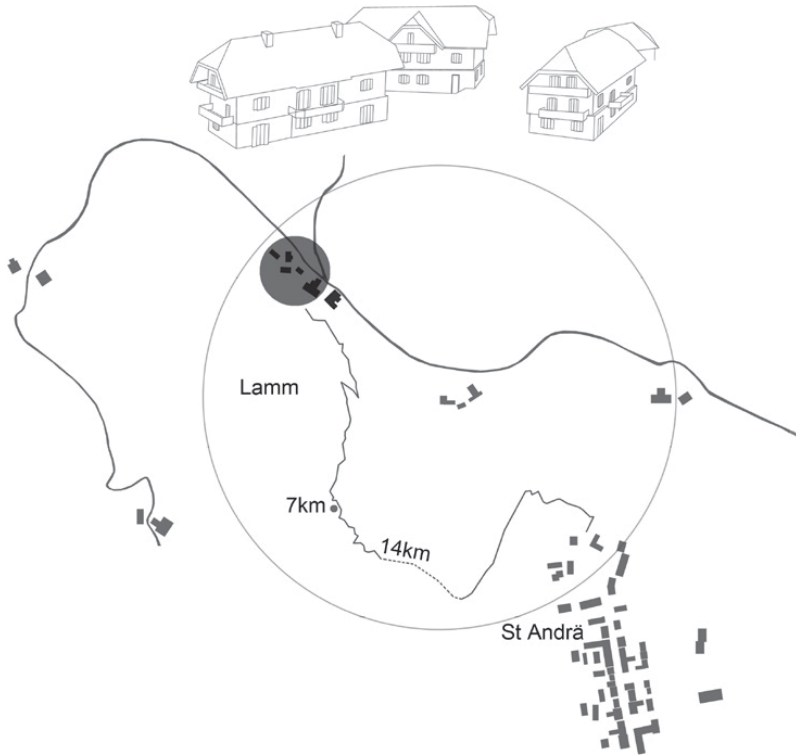
In her book *Die Totale Institution Asyl*, Täubig (2009) writes about an organized disintegration within asylum policy, whereby establishments protect their residents or even – sometimes voluntarily and sometimes otherwise – screen them from their surroundings and, hence, exclude them from society. Although the use of establishments with fewer beds should be seen positively, the often remote location of private guest rooms, rural hotels, motels and holiday villages leads to the increasing isolation of asylum seekers and, hence, limits their opportunities to establish social networks, act politically and participate actively in society.

In this context, it is helpful to look at the properties of ‘carceral junctions’, proposed by Simon Turner and Zachary White (2022), that, similarly to the ‘total institution’, depart from the immediate physical boundaries of the camp and conceptually look at the entire system of confinement and connectedness in the asylum system. By going beyond walls and fences and thinking of camps more ‘about modes of access and interface’ (Turner and White, 2022), as well as the different mobilities that shape them, we can better understand how the very camp infrastructures themselves can become subject to change and even lead to the adaption of tourism facilities. Goffman (1961: 12) characterizes total institutions as intrinsically hybrid constructions, ‘part residential community, part formal organization’, that establish a barrier to the outside world and at the same time remove all barriers that separate the details of everyday life of residents on the inside. The disintegrating character addressed by Täubig (2009) is based on the concept of the total institution that, according to Goffman (1961: 69), composes a ‘kind of dead sea in which little islands of vivid, encapturing activity appear ... Yet it is precisely in the insufficiency of these activities that an important deprivational effect of total institutions can be found.’

One illustration of the concepts of the total institution and carceral junctions can be found in Almdorf Grassler in the sparsely populated settlement of Lamm, which is situated around 1,000 m above the Adriatic on the Saualpe mountain ridge in Carinthia, Austria’s most southerly province. St Andrä, the closest village with a shop, is down in the valley, 9 km away, and cannot be reached by public transport. Asylum seekers are forced to rely on the goodwill of the operator of the accommodation or volunteers from among the settlement’s 172 inhabitants, with whose help they can do their shopping by car or keep appointments with the authorities in the district capital. The only alternative is a three-hour walk with a return leg that would include a climb of 650 m. In such an isolated situation, making social contact with anyone outside the accommodation or attending a language course appears virtually impossible (see Figures 14.3 and 14.4).

In addition to the policy of distributing migrants across the country, such isolated locations have also been encouraged by the broad terms of the legal

Figure 14.3: Holiday Village Lamm, located just below the mountain ridge Saualpe, exemplifies the dispersed and remote character of accommodation for asylum seekers in Austria



Note: This figure is also available online at <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/refugeereception-and-camps>

Source: Illustration by Jasmin Stadlhofer, *Fluchtraum Österreich* Master Studio, Faculty of Architecture, TU Wien. Reproduced with permission.

texts that describe the living environment for asylum seekers in Austria and in the European Union (EU). At the EU level, member states are required to provide minimum standards for temporary protection of asylum seekers, ‘adequate’ accommodation and the provision of social benefits.⁸ Furthermore, the EU legislation defines the ‘material reception’ of asylum seekers, which includes adequate premises such as accommodation centres, private houses, apartments and hotels but also permits member states to select other premises in exceptional situations in which the capacity of the existing accommodation is exhausted.⁹ There is, however, no article dedicated to the definition of the actual quality of accommodation or of the notion of the quality of life for asylum seekers. The absence of a clearer definition of the actual living environment is exploited by private accommodation providers who focus on the efficient and profitable

Figure 14.4: Residents of asylum-seeker accommodation in Lamm playing cricket at 1,000 m above sea level and at a distance of 9 km from the nearest town, which is down in the valley



Source: Photograph by Johannes Puchleitner, *Fluchtraum Österreich* Master Studio, Faculty of Architecture, TU Wien. Reproduced with permission.

operation of their property. Asylum seekers thus often find themselves in an environment that is far from providing ‘living conditions’ and that they described in interview as merely ‘a place to stay’ dominated by temporariness and bureaucratization.

The national legislation on the accommodation of asylum seekers in Austria is governed by the Law on Basic Care¹⁰ and can be described as being as vague as the European laws.¹¹ Regarding the location of any accommodation, Section 2(1a) stipulates that asylum seekers do not have the ‘right to receive care in a particular federal support facility or province’, which further enforces their organized disintegration.

The actual accommodation – following registration and temporary housing in a federal reception facility – is located in one of Austria’s nine provinces. The Agreement on Basic Care between the federal government and the nine provinces¹² contains conditions covering subjects such as the infrastructure necessary to care for asylum seekers and adequate catering and health provision, but adds that basic care can be restricted during mass movements of refugees, as long as such restrictions do not endanger the basic needs of people as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights. Both European and Austrian legislation leave a lot of room for flexible interpretation of the quality of accommodation required for

asylum seekers under the historically developed system of predominantly private proprietors. With the exception of Vienna, where the city council has a policy of not entering into contracts for the provision of organized accommodation with private individuals but does so exclusively with associations or NGOs, the great majority of accommodation for asylum seekers in Austria is provided by the private operators of former tourist facilities. In combination with inadequate monitoring of accommodation by public authorities, this leads to the production of spaces that often lack the necessary qualities for living and are temporary in character.¹³ The seemingly paradoxical result is a prolongation of the condition of flight that refugees find themselves in even after they have applied for asylum in their host country.

The housing sector in Austria, particularly in Vienna, offers a wide range of instruments designed to ensure quality standards that are extremely high, especially when compared internationally. Above all, the housing construction subsidies awarded by the provincial governments are a means of guaranteeing minimum housing standards such as certain standards of finish and minimum apartment sizes. Examples of the legal anchoring of such forms of quality control include Vienna's Housing Construction Subsidy and Housing Refurbishment Law. In Vienna, further organizational structures established in the 1980's and 1990's such as developer competitions and the site advisory committee offer additional quality-control mechanisms (Amann and Lechner, 2011). However, in contrast with these very high standards for housing, both provincial governments and proprietors of accommodation for asylum seekers are only able to base the quality of their provision on extremely vaguely defined guidelines. In legal terms, they are required – not only by EU guidelines but also by Austria's Law on Basic Care and the laws of the individual provinces – to do no more than 'provide appropriate accommodation that respects human dignity'. As a supplement to this, the document 'Minimum Standards Related to Basic Care Accommodation in Austria',¹⁴ which is not legally binding, was produced in November 2013 by the refugee departments of the provincial governments in response to ongoing criticism (Knapp, 2010).¹⁵ These guidelines represent an attempt to create minimum, Austria-wide standards for facilities offering accommodation to asylum seekers.

According to the Austrian Association of Municipalities, the objective of these minimum standards is – like that of existing national and EU-wide regulations – to provide 'accommodation that protects human dignity'. The association justifies this broad definition with the argument that 'general standards defining how asylum seekers should be accommodated',¹⁶ would be impossible to impose in Austria for the simple reason that the provinces have 'very different rules in such areas as building regulations, zoning and fire protection'.¹⁷ Besides defining a maximum occupancy level (five

people per room) and minimum area per person (8m² plus 4m² for every additional person in a room), the ‘minimum standards related to basic care accommodation in Austria’ only list the numbers of sanitary facilities (a maximum of ten people per toilet, washbasin and shower) and the minimum equipment for a residential unit (a wardrobe and a table plus – per person – a bed with a pillow, blanket and sheets, a chair and a one-piece cupboard). On top of this, very few concrete requirements in these (non-binding) guidelines go beyond elementary information regarding the usability of the space.

Mass movements of refugees are also commonly used to defend the failure to meet these minimum standards. For example, Anny Knapp (2016) from the NGO *asylkoordination österreich* criticizes the ‘undermining of minimum standards’, which officials seek to justify by citing the current high number of asylum applications. One result of this is that proprietors are generally left to decide the extent to which they should respond to the needs of their residents and implement the requirements set out by their contractual partners, the provincial governments. In the vacuum created by these inadequate legal definitions, the quality of accommodation is often left to the whim of the individual operator. Herbert Langthaler, also from *asylkoordination österreich*, criticizes the minimum standards guidelines as being very difficult to enforce: residents are only to be offered communal space ‘where possible and according to need’, and ‘social areas, playrooms and playgrounds’ are only to be provided in family accommodation ‘if possible’. In addition to this, he believes that five residents per room is simply too many and points to the German state of Bavaria, in which two- or three-bed rooms represent the maximum (see Brickner, 2014).

Flexible local governance

Austria’s Law on Basic Care distinguishes between the roles of ‘organized’ and ‘private accommodation’. Organized accommodation is managed by the contractual partner, whereas, in the case of private accommodation, the premises are let directly to the asylum seeker or to a contractual partner of the responsible provincial government. The list of potential partners whom provincial governments can commission to organize accommodation, support and care for asylum seekers includes NGOs, companies, hospitality operators and private individuals.¹⁸ If the contractual partners are private individuals, asylum seekers usually receive mobile social support from an NGO. While people who let their premises as private accommodation have no obligation to provide catering or other support to asylum seekers, organized accommodation offers three possible forms of support: full board, half board or self-catering. Depending upon the quality of the existing infrastructure, the level of investment required to upgrade this infrastructure and the cost of kitchen personnel, the operators of such accommodation choose one of

these models, generally on the basis of economic considerations. Given that facilities that were previously used as tourist accommodation tend to have an existing kitchen infrastructure and personnel, most choose a contract with full board.

The forms of accommodation analysed as part of the research project 'Fluchtraum Österreich' included hotels, rest homes and residential schools, village and country guesthouses, pensions (B&Bs), motels and holiday homes and apartments. Among these, there were several examples of premises that could be temporarily repurposed in order to offer 'hospitality' (Gibson, 2003) to either refugees or tourists, depending on capacity. This flexibility in the local provision of accommodation is possible because the infrastructure for accommodating asylum seekers is often already in place, and the establishments are ready for use without major rebuilding or renovation work. Furthermore, the provincial governments – like large travel companies – offer contracts for 100 per cent occupancy. In turn, the involvement of the proprietors means that the control of the foreigners can be delegated to a sector that is already accustomed to the formalities of Austrian visitor registration. Given that asylum seekers who are receiving basic care in Austria are not permitted to remain away from their accommodation for more than three days, it is envisaged that their presence is checked and legally registered with the responsible provincial authorities in a similar way to the 'registration requirement' for foreigners (tourists). In this 'total institution', proprietors of asylum-seeker accommodation are clearly separated from the residents in order to fulfil their role as bodies of control. According to Goffman (1961: 7–8), their 'chief activity is not guidance or periodic inspection (as in many employer–employee relations) but rather surveillance'. In addition to the social distance that is necessary to uphold the relationship between the controlling and the controlled bodies, communication between the two strata is following clear roles as well. Goffman speaks of 'talk across the boundaries ... in a special tone of voice', an observation we also made during our field visits, where in addition to an institutionalized form of verbal communication a multitude of mandatory and prohibition signs are often (hand)written in a military diction.

Outsourcing to private providers also means outsourcing to operators who have no training in the area of migration or in the accommodation of vulnerable persons. In order to transform a tourism establishment into accommodation for asylum seekers, proprietors in Austria need neither show evidence of any special training in the provision of space or care to asylum seekers, nor employ specially trained staff. The support of asylum seekers within the basic care system is the responsibility of either the refugee department of the provincial government or one of the religious, private or aid organizations commissioned by that same government to carry out that task. However, as the task is limited to visiting each establishment once or

twice a week and as, in some provinces, one carer can be responsible for up to 200 asylum seekers, the reality is that the operator of the establishment both remains the day-to-day contact person for the refugees and has to organize the cohabitation of a wide range of individuals and cultural groups.

When questioned in interviews about the extent to which their activities have changed since first taking in asylum seekers, all the proprietors initially and resolutely answered with the words ‘I treat all guests the same. I make no difference between asylum seekers and tourists.’¹⁹ However, in the course of these conversations, proprietors such as Elisabeth Steiner, who runs Gasthof Bärenwirt, which accommodates asylum seekers in Weitensfeld in Carinthia, add that they have clearly been given a new role: ‘We are simply thrown into this situation. None of us has the remotest notion of what we should actually expect. And we really have to be everything. We are not only landlord, provider of accommodation and proprietor, but also mother, psychologist, social worker and nurse.’²⁰ As the provider of the accommodation, they are responsible for its operation and, at the same time, they are expected to care for vulnerable people with special (housing) needs, most of whom have experienced traumas both in the countries from which they have fled and during their flight and now have to adjust to a radically new environment. Switching between these multiple roles and left alone by the responsible authorities, proprietors are overstretched as they attempt to meet the special living requirements of refugees with different cultural backgrounds.

It is important to note that proprietors have not consciously chosen to play these multiple roles, but are pushed into doing so by the local governance model of the Austrian asylum system, which allows for the flexible operation of their premises, switching between tourism facilities and asylum accommodation. In this process, neither the local government nor the proprietors are interested in ‘providing people with a home’ but rather extending security technologies that have the ability to control bodies (Rother, 2012).

For many operators, the accommodation of asylum seekers represents a (final) alternative operating model, because it guarantees high occupancy rates all year round without the need for major constructional intervention or investment. In cases in which investments are made, much of the budget is allocated to upgrading safety features and the prevention of potential damage resulting from the improper use of appliances and sanitary facilities. Preventing fire and water damage and controlling access are the leading concerns of building owners. Safety is often used as a pretext for reducing residents’ quality of life. Such adaptations can turn a previously welcoming tourism facility into a ‘total institution’ (Goffman, 1961) with a prison-like atmosphere, where not only are spacious lobbies transformed into technical control points that radically separate the public from the private domain, but additional internal barriers are erected in the form of security doors between

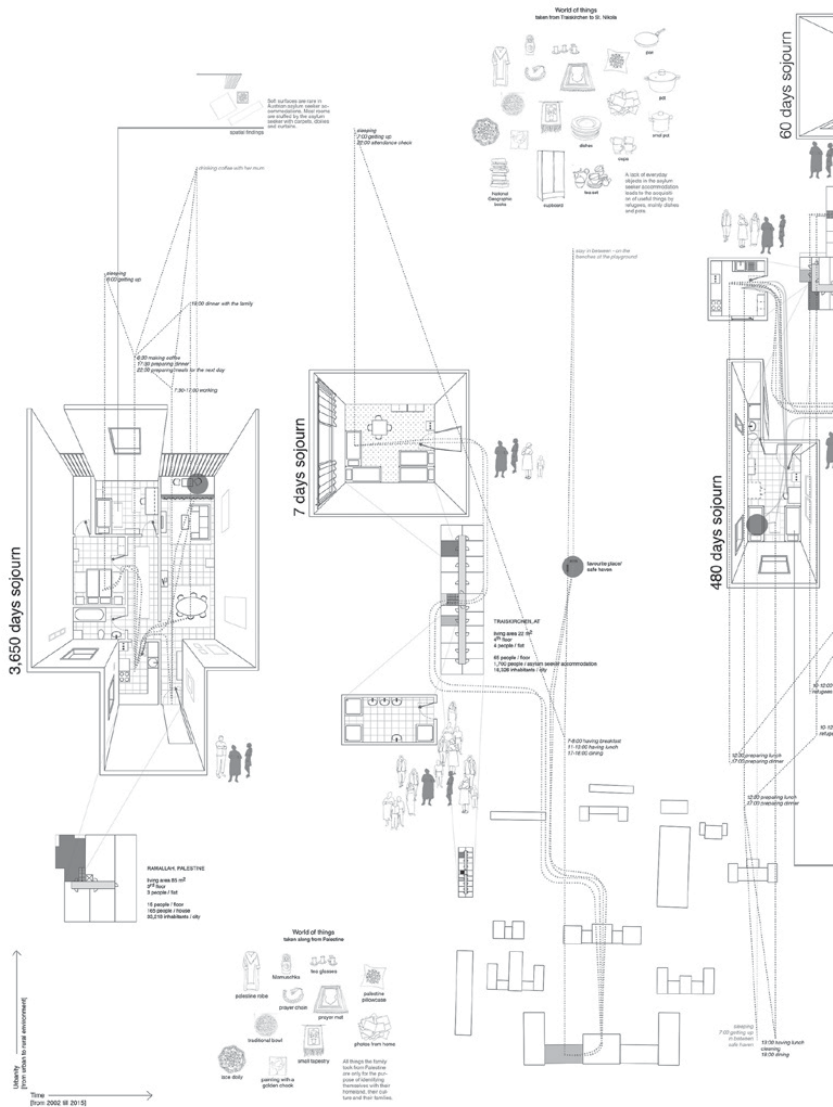
adjacent floors that hinder free movement within the building. In addition to these security-related ‘upgrades’, our research has also exposed owners who deliberately downgrade former tourism facilities rather than invest in their property. They, once again, are motivated by economic considerations. As discussed earlier, the laws on basic care ensure that proprietors receive more money from the federal government for providing accommodation for asylum seekers that offers full board. This has led to fully functioning kitchens in holiday apartments being removed in order to prevent future residents from cooking for themselves (and, hence, reducing the income of the owner of the facility).

The absence of a living environment

Although the need for protection naturally takes precedence during refugees’ flight and immediately after their arrival in their country of asylum, the need for an everyday routine, to rediscover the notion of ‘living’ and to feel a sense of spatial belonging becomes essential again soon after asylum seekers have moved into their new accommodation (Soltau, 2015). Self-determination, a retreat, and the possibility of creating a personal atmosphere are basic needs of living. Katja Friedrich (2018) expands the concept of living as a practice of self-determined action, ‘which becomes visible as an expression of oneself, creating a sense of well-being and perceiving the home as a space for feeling secure’. The term ‘living’ is especially relevant in this context, given that asylum processes in Austria currently last several months and, in extreme cases, several years (see Figure 14.5). In contemporary accommodation for asylum seekers, the concept of living is countered by a bureaucratic system that, in the case of Austria, has been building ‘total institutions’ since the first examples of camp infrastructures in the Austro-Hungarian empire of the 19th century. The architecture historian Antje Senarclens de Grancy sheds a light on the historical practice of camp building by the state through looking at the entanglements of architecture and urban design with the camp and pointing to the ‘de-individualizing’ terminologies (Senarclens de Grancy, 2024: 198) that had been used in the process of the organization and construction of then so-called ‘refugee depots’. Even though Goffman’s total institution seems to be an overwhelming apparatus, asylum seekers in said accommodation are more than mere inmates as Goffman described them: they are active actors (Turner and Whyte, 2022) by – if in some instances only marginally as this research reveals – appropriating space and overcoming the legal and physical barriers that are standing in the way of living a self-determined life.

Among the minimum requirements that make ‘living’ possible again are the opportunity to make decisions about one’s own life and living space – in particular whether, and for how long, one remains in a particular place – and

Figure 14.5: A visualization mapping the spaces that Mrs H and her daughter stayed in during their asylum application in Austria over the course of nine years (continued on the next page)



Notes: The visualization starts with Mrs H and her daughter's escape from Ramallah, Palestine to multiple locations in Austria. While the level of detail increases to include the description of carpets, the daily routines and the family's favourite places, it also becomes evident that they were still far from a self-determined condition of living, remaining instead in a state of being-located. The mapping

the opportunity to decide how one appropriates this living space and expresses oneself individually and culturally. As the rules of basic care determine that provincial governments allocate asylum seekers to specific establishments and define their radius of movement, asylum seekers in Austria cannot influence where they will be located during their asylum process. The duration of their stay is also unforeseeable due to the variable length of the process, as a result of which asylum seekers find themselves in a state of continuous standby and waiting, a state of limbo that Turner and Whyte describe as an ‘almost unbearable’ condition that is replicated within the asylum process and, through its multiplicity, creates the paradox of camps being ‘*at once* sites of confinement and junctions that connect and enable mobility’ (Turner and Whyte, 2022: 2). Within this accommodation itself, the proprietor decides which rooms can be used at what times and for what purposes. Asylum seekers often have to share a room with up to five people, and the ‘individual design of the room must be agreed between the residents and the proprietor’.²¹ Entering this ‘total society’ of the asylum accommodation, thus goes in line with involuntarily giving away control over one’s own life. The transfer of the ‘capacity to act’ to someone other than oneself, coined by Goffman (1961) as ‘civic death’, leads to the loss of self-determination over daily routines including meal-times and the place to stay in general.

‘Living’ also means having private space into which one can retreat or, at least temporarily, escape the regime of the ‘total institution’. As rooms have several occupants, personal space in accommodation for asylum seekers tends to be very limited. In many cases, residents have no opportunity to create their own private space, and any final remaining room for retreat is kept not for themselves but for their private possessions – under the bed or inside a cupboard. Unannounced checks of rooms by operators and the fact that keys are often missing mean that even the smallest unit allocated to refugees is invariably visible to outsiders and under control of the authority of the total institution, represented by the proprietor of the accommodation (Figures 14.6 and 14.7).

As there is often a lack of suitable communal spaces – or simply because of the intuitive desire to maximize opportunities to live individually – many aspects of ‘living’ take place in residents’ own rooms. Sleeping, eating, studying, watching television generally happen in the same place – on the bed – which is not only a source of potential conflict with other residents, but also reduces the already limited radius of movement of asylum seekers even further. In conversations with them, it also became clear that, the smaller this private space becomes, the greater its importance and the more steps they will take to differentiate it clearly from the space of fellow residents and others. The accommodation as ‘total institution’ is in that sense a place that neither fosters community nor respects privacy. Everyday life is merely administered and constantly on full display. In *Asylums*, Goffman illustrates the importance of ‘personal territory’

Figure 14.7: Petershof as an example of how important it is for refugees to be able to construct their personal spaces within accommodation that forces them to share kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms with complete strangers



Source: Photograph by Johannes Puchleitner, Fluchtraum Österreich Master Studio, Faculty of Architecture, TU Wien. Reproduced with permission.

Rather than being designed for long-term stays, tourism establishments are mostly intended for guests on shorter visits. Hence, when these guests are asylum seekers, they have to create their new home in a place of permanent mobility, an environment that Turner and White describe as the double sense of ‘moving camps’ as carceral junctions (Turner and White, 2022).

In this context, Raimund Pehm (2016) speaks of *gebaute Migrationspolitik*, which translates as ‘spatialized migration politics’, in which, first, the policy of accommodating asylum seekers in tourism establishments implements the short-term approach of the responsible politicians and, second, the sense of permanent mobility and insecurity that accompanies refugees simply continues after their arrival at their destination due to a lack of the long-term planning that would offer them the necessary protection (see Figure 14.7).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research and mapping work described in this chapter has revealed that the asylum system in Austria is designed as a ‘total institution’ with ‘quasi-carceral’ qualities and lacks the long-term planning required to provide asylum seekers with the infrastructure they need for getting closer to a state of ‘living’. The research has also shown that rather than upgrading

their former tourism facilities and improving residents' quality of life, private proprietors of such accommodation intentionally downgrade them under the pretext of improved safety. Investments are made to expand the oversight over asylum seekers and extend the reach of control. Goffman's concept (1961) of the 'total institution' revealed the importance of 'personal territory' in an environment that is systematically designed to disintegrate residents from society and each other. Through mapping and documenting those personal spaces and the physical manifestations of their encompassing 'total institutions' in collaboration with the residents of asylum-seeker accommodation, this research sought to lay the groundwork for imagining places where the concept of 'living' could be realized. While Goffman listed locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors (1961: 4) as characteristics that seclude residents from the 'outside', the visual research of the *Fluchtraum Österreich* project added features of architecture and furniture, such as doors, beds, cupboards, curtains, carpets, pillows and blankets as extended spaces controlled by the 'total institution'. Yet these spaces have also been identified as opportunities for residents to, at least temporarily, escape the 'total institution' by creating private or personal space and therefore reclaim a 'state of living'. We argue that in order for activities such as retreat and the possibility of creating a personal atmosphere to take place, there needs to be an actual physical space that can be appropriated and which enables and empowers residents to act in a self-determined way and regain access to their living space and their own mobility.

The principal reasons for the creation of the total institution are the historically explained policy of shifting responsibility for accommodation for asylum seekers to overstretched private operators and the economic interdependency that has developed between former tourism facilities and the provincial governments that are formally responsible for accommodating refugees. In a federal system, federal rules have the potential to make a key contribution to the provision of high-quality accommodation for asylum seekers. In Austria, however, the formulation and implementation of such rules is heavily dependent on local political actors who, at the end of the day, take the decisions about approving, repurposing or controlling the quality of former tourist accommodation and, hence, exercise considerable political influence. The flexible application of this mode of local governance was responsible, in one instance, for preventing a former old people's centre from being used as asylum accommodation because of a strict insistence on compliance with building codes (e.g. stricter fire regulations resulting from increased occupancy), while, in another, it allowed asylum seekers to be accommodated in a space that was never intended for people to live in and thus circumvented building codes (such as a former warehouse).

A number of key features of former tourism facilities exemplify how far asylum seekers can be from enjoying a self-determined life and exercising their

right to adequate housing. These instances of regulated hospitality include: the often decentralized location of facilities, which goes hand in hand with a lack of social contact and ultimately turns these facilities into ‘green prisons’ for asylum seekers; forms of accommodation such as motels situated next to main roads that are fundamentally unsuitable for long stays; and the transformation of communal areas into spaces in which operators can control residents rather than providing desperately needed personal space. The fact is that the implied temporary nature of the movement of migrants, which is reinforced by the almost permanent institutional state of emergency that underlies both European and Austrian asylum policy, makes any strategic approach impossible and results in legal and spatial ad hoc solutions. The movement of migrants is a permanent geopolitical reality. Hence, it is overdue for host countries such as Austria to develop long-term spatial solutions and legal frameworks that will prevent any undermining of urgently needed standards.

Notes

- ¹ In its 2016 comparative report, the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) listed the ‘second-line reception facilities’ of 20 European countries (AIDA, 2016). Second-line reception facilities are used throughout the duration of the asylum procedure after initial reception. While the majority used different forms of reception centres as accommodation for ‘second-line reception’, Austria resorted to the use of ‘private housing at provincial level’ which equates to the predominant use of tourism establishments as shown in this chapter. Only Spain and the United Kingdom used hotels as emergency accommodation, outside the regular ‘second-line reception facilities’, according to this report.
- ² See www.fluchtraum.at: We are grateful to Léa Lemaire, Lucas Oesch and the reviewers for their important comments onto prior drafts of this chapter. Special thanks go to Anny Knapp and Herbert Langthaler from the NGO asylkoordination österreich for their invaluable expertise and their ceaseless activism; Nora Akawi, Peter Haslinger, Gabu Heindl, Michael Klein, Christina Linortner, Markus Miessen, Raimund Pehm, Eduardo Rega, Manfred Russo and Amila Širbegović for their critical reflections; Markus Bader, Gordana Brandner, Elke Delugan-Meissl, Engineers without Borders, Sabine Dreher, Anna Kokolanova, Franz Koppelstätter, Raffaella Lackner, Christian Muhr, Michael Zinganel, Micheal Hieslmair, Marlene Rutzendorfer and UNHCR for providing platforms to discuss our research; the anonymous proprietors of asylum accommodation, and the outstanding host Elisabeth Steiner who is running her inn Gasthof Bärenwirt as an open house for integration; to our students and authors of the graphic work Osama Almughanni, Reem Alkaisy, Daniela Glasl, Tina Köppel, Marie-Therese Krejcik, Max Mariel, Alexander Masching, Brigit Miksch, Lisa Mittelberger, Argtim Osmani, Ini Peters, Mehtap Polat, Johannes Puchleitner, Roman Pulker, Daniel Röggl, Alina Schönhofer, Özlem Simsek, Martina Soi Gunelas, Lea Soltau, Jasmin Stadlhofer, Aloisia Tamer, Anton Wagner, Mario Weisböck, Enrico Weiser; and last but not least to our interview partners and residents of asylum-seeker accommodation who actively contributed with their oral history to the research and the graphic output of this chapter, while we respect their wish to remain anonymous in this context.
- ³ ‘While up until the year 1987 the number of migrants who arrived in Austria equaled the number of persons who moved on to another country, in 1989 only 25% of migrants left the country’ (König, 1990: 24).

- ⁴ Before this, the accommodation of refugees had largely been limited to the provinces that bordered the former Eastern Bloc countries, Upper Austria, Lower Austria and Burgenland.
- ⁵ Asylum applications: 42,073 in 2016 and 24,296 in 2017 (UNHCR, 2017).
- ⁶ Interview with the operator of Gasthof Lazarus, 8 June 2021.
- ⁷ This intention was particularly important for Austria due to the declaration of perpetual neutrality following the withdrawal of Allied troops and the declaration of independence in the constitution of the new republic (see Pehm, 2016).
- ⁸ Directive 2001/55/EG of the Council of the EU.
- ⁹ Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of the EU.
- ¹⁰ Federal Law on Basic Care (2005) (BGBl no. I 100/2005 idF BGBl I no. 122/2009).
- ¹¹ Federal Law on Basic Care (2005) (BGBl no. I 100/2005 idF BGBl I no. 122/2009).
- ¹² Agreement on Basic Care (GVV) between the federal and provincial governments in line with Article 15a B-VG (BGBl. no. I 80/2004).
- ¹³ In contrast to private operators, humanitarian and religious organizations generally meet or even exceed the required standards.
- ¹⁴ Second Conference of the Refugee Departments of the Provincial Governments (2014) 'Mindeststandards betreffend die Unterbringung in der Grundversorgung in Österreich', Available from: www.burgenland.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Bilder/Land_und_Politik/Wohnraumspende/Mindeststandards.pdf [Accessed 15 December 2021].
- ¹⁵ See the 2012 policy paper on basic care from Agenda Asyl, Available from: http://archiv.asyl.at/fakten_2/grundsatzpapier_integration_agenda_11_13.pdf [Accessed 13 October 2018].
- ¹⁶ Second Conference of the Refugee Departments of the Provincial Governments (2014). See note 16.
- ¹⁷ 'Asylquartiere – Welche Mindestanforderungen gibt es?', *Kommunal, Zeitschrift des Gemeindebundes Österreich*, Available from: www.kommunal.at/asylquartiere-welche-mindestanforderungen-gibt-es [Accessed 13 October 2018].
- ¹⁸ In Vienna, private individuals cannot agree a contract with the city council but may rent their accommodation to, for example, an NGO that will operate the facility.
- ¹⁹ Research visits to accommodation for asylum seekers in Austria as part of the course *Fluchtraum Österreich*, 7–12 April 2015 and 8–13 April 2016.
- ²⁰ Research visits to accommodation for asylum seekers in Austria as part of the course *Fluchtraum Österreich*, 7–12 April 2015 and 8–13 April 2016.
- ²¹ Second Conference of the Refugee Departments of the Provincial Governments (2014). See note 14.

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