

Side by side, but far apart?
Refugee–host relationships and narratives in a
displacement economy

Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) Thesis

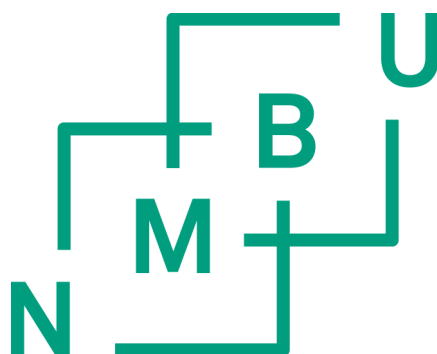
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Summary of the Thesis

Most refugees today reside in developing countries and sustainable solutions to assist them and their host populations are in great demand (UNHCR 2020a). The literature increasingly recognises the need to study both refugee and host populations in a displacement context; however, empirical evidence about the relationship between these populations remains scarce, particularly in low-income countries. This situation calls for holistic and durable solutions that will deliver sustainable policies to the host, as well as to the refugee, populations.

The core aim of this study was to analyse the relationships between refugee and host populations that live side by side, in order to determine how they shape new displacement economies and how this affects everyday livelihood strategies. Specifically, the research questions ask (1) How do interactions among actors in a displacement setting affect livelihood opportunities in a displacement economy? (2) What social and institutional factors can explain the types and characteristics of refugee–host relationships and their effects in a displacement setting? (3) What are the significance and roles of storytelling in relationships and livelihood approaches in a displacement economy?

The study investigated three cases which enabled an empirical investigation of the refugee–host relationship in three different displacement settings: In Liberia, refugees from the Ivory Coast lived in a camp setting with relative freedom to move in and out of the camps; the internally displaced persons camps in northern Uganda were in the midst of a war zone, and it was considered a risk to leave the camp; and in southwestern Uganda, refugees were provided with a plot of land, freedom to work, and significant freedom of movement.

One of the main findings is that many displacement situations create a competitive structure that shapes the refugee–host relationships. When refugees enter the scene, an international regime is activated, providing them resources and rights that can position the refugees to compete with the host population for additional resources. Furthermore, in a cyclical pattern, the relationships reshape the structure, and the structure re-forms the relationships.

This research extends beyond the assumption that refugees are a burden or a benefit. Such a ‘burden-versus-benefits’ debate is more complicated than what Maystadt and Verwimp (2014) frame as ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ among a refugee population. Instead, I delve

into the varying dynamics at play in displacement contexts. The conditions that the influx of refugees create – and the support infrastructure the refugee regime establishes – can create both inter-dependence and competition for resources among and between refugees and their host communities. Three of this study's five publications discuss the effects of these relationships on the displacement economy. They build on and contribute to the displacement-economies approach and assert that competition can coexist alongside social cohesion. They reflect the first two research questions, which address the livelihood opportunities shaped by the new relationships in – and the social and institutional factors that explain the characteristics of – a displacement setting.

The other two papers address how refugee and host populations manoeuvre the constraints and opportunities inherent in the displacement context. These papers consider the significance and roles of storytelling in relationships and approaches in a displacement economy. Using interpretive analysis to understand the ways in which actors navigate this terrain of uncertainties, I suggest making use of Scott's (1995) theory of public transcripts to argue that public stories of victimhood as can be utilized strategically as a 'weapon of the weak' to navigate in challenging circumstances.

My empirical findings add to the current knowledge base on displacement economies by exploring how refugees and their hosts manoeuvre their relationships in a displacement context and how this manoeuvring contributes to livelihood strategies. The study further contributes to current academic discussions about displacement economies, refugee protection in developing countries, and how researchers might investigate these phenomena.